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ISSUE 154 FEBRUARY 2006

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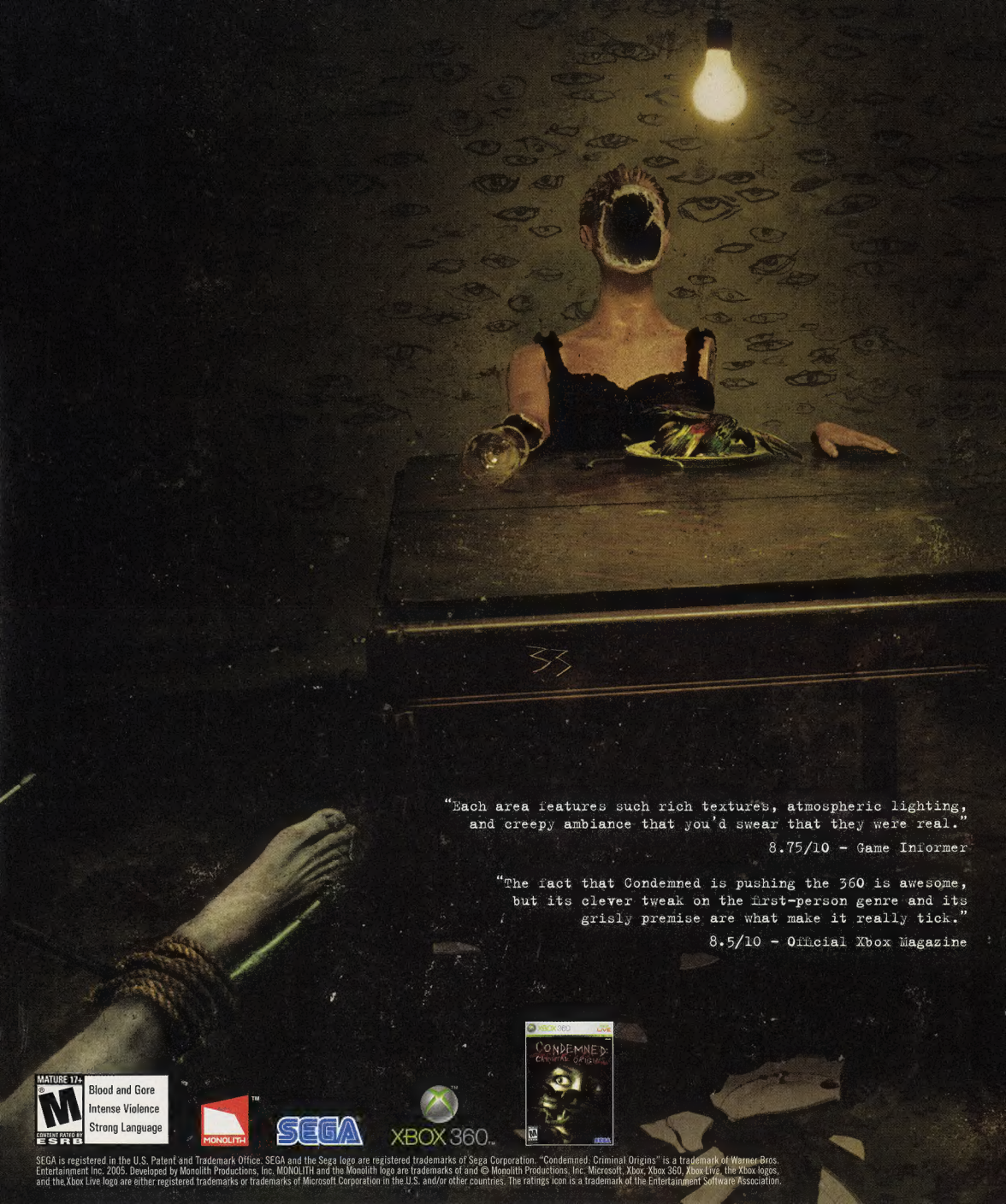
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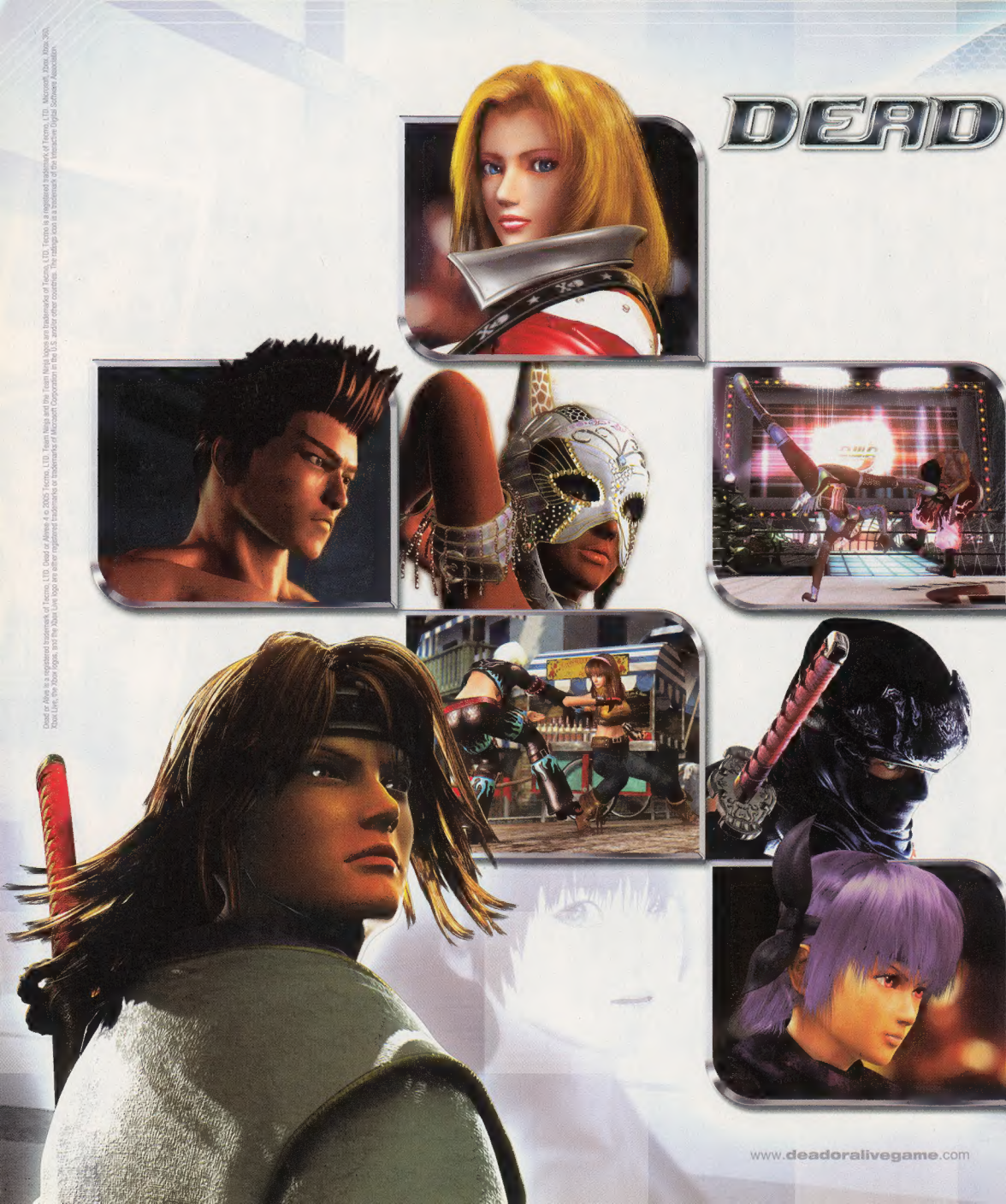
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STAFF

People Who Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games



SUDDENLY THERE WAS NOTHING

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As a product of my life experiences, I am a video game dork. In fact, as I look through the rearview mirror, I see my entire life is not dotted with the normal landmarks, like when I first rode a bike or went to Senior Prom (though I'm pretty sure I went...I think). Instead, it is filled with the thrills and wonders of games played.

I remember playing Star Trek in ASCII text before games had graphics. I remember playing Dragon's Lair at the corner 7-Eleven. I remember saving the princess.

For all these wonderful thoughts, the most recurring memory for me is the great video game crash of 1983. Watching my wonderful world of games come falling down around me was unlike anything I had ever experienced. Video game historians blame Atari for its poor planning and lack of innovation. I remember the whole thing differently.

I saw the positive side of the games I was playing. Especially when you compared them against my first gaming experiences, which were text adventures and ASCII constructs. So when I woke up one day to find hundreds of games for sale at massive discounts, I thought Christmas had just come early. Little did I know that this wasn't a bargain; this was a fire sale. The games industry was collapsing and retailers were dumping product before the hobby blinked into non-existence.

I remember the time of nothing after the crash. It's weird when I think about it; gaming literally fell off the face of the earth. Then all of a sudden one day, out of the blue, there was Mario. This wondrous machine called the Nintendo Entertainment System came into my life and saved me.

Besides being a nice little video game tale, this story is a warning. One I think about during every generational transition. Sometimes people get too caught up in graphics, or whether this racing game is better than that racing game, and forget the fun that video games are all about.

Find games you like, and play them. Because if you don't you could wake up one day like I did and find them gone.

It's not cool. Trust me on this one.

Cheers,





Andy >> *andy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Hombre **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Platform, Driving, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** The Idea Of Worldwide Launches, Planning A New Home Theater In My Head **Dislikes:** The Execution Of Worldwide Launches (Next Time Just Try To Get It Right In One Region Please Microsoft Instead Of Wrong In All), Blogholes (The Word I Made Up For Bloggers Who Say Things In Their Blogs That They Wouldn't Have The Nuts To Say To Your Face) **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Need For Speed Most Wanted, Black



Reiner >> *reiner@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Raging Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Fighting, Action/Platform, Strategy, Sports **Interests:** Xbox Live Gamerscores (6,000 And Counting), The Last Two Years Of Batman Comics (Finally There Is Change), The Approaching Baseball Season, *Family Guy* **Dislikes:** Getting Caught Rocking Out Uncontrollably While Playing Guitar Hero (Think Nerdy Angus Young), The Small Number Of New 360 Games Coming This Spring **Current Favorite Games:** Mortal Kombat: Armageddon, Major League Baseball 2K6, Call Of Duty 2, Ape Escape 3, Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition, Civilization IV, Guitar Hero



Matt >> *matt@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Original Gamer **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Action/Platform, Action/Adventure, Action/Sports **Interests:** *Walk The Line*, *King Kong*, NOMEANSNO – *The People's Choice*, The Hold Steady – *Separation Sunday*, Finishing The Record **Dislikes:** "In Gado We Trust," Snow, Not Having Good Boots, Five-String Basses (You Don't Know What To Do With Four!) **Current Favorite Games:** Ape Escape 3, Gun, Peter Jackson's King Kong



Kato >> *kato@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Game Katana **Expertise:** Sports, Racing, Action/Adventure, Action/Platform **Interests:** *Walk The Line*, All Girl Summer Fun Band, *Knowing Me, Knowing You With Alan Partridge* DVD, Goalie Yutaka Fukufuji – The First Japanese Player Drafted By An NHL Team, *Franklin Comes Alive* **Dislikes:** The Passing Of Richard Pryor, The Cancellation Of *Arrested Development*, America's Crappy World Cup Draw (Bring On The Azzurri!), Finger Bowl-Using Cake Eaters **Current Favorite Games:** NHL 2K6 (Xbox 360 w/ Crease Control), Battles Of Prince Persia, Winning Eleven 9, Fight Night Round 3



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Handle: La Game Nikita **Expertise:** Survival Horror, Adventure, RPGs, Action/Platform, Racing **Interests:** Cupcakes (Always And Forever), *King Kong*, *His Dark Materials*, Resident Evil 4 Figures, Perfect Snow, Having Grocenes Delivered (Like Christmas, But With Less Special Foodstuffs) **Dislikes:** Holiday Shoppers, Black Friday (Ugh, No Way), That Stupid Tuber And Gerbil Quest In Ratchet **Current Favorite Games:** World Of Warcraft, Amped 3, Call Of Duty 2, Watching Other People Play Condemned For The First Time (The Self-Imposed Terror Of Others Cracks Me Up), Prince Of Persia. The Two Thrones



Jeremy >> *jeremy@gameinformer.com*

Handle: Gamezilla **Expertise:** First-Person Shooters, Survival Horror, Action/Platform, Fighting, Strategy/RPGs **Interests:** A Very Guitar Hero Christmas, King Kong (In Movie, Game, and Cake Form), Danny Boyle's *Millions*, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, *MI-5* Season 3 DVDs **Dislikes:** Not Having My Own Element On The Periodic Table ("Godzillium," Or Possibly "Pantsnium"), Shoveling Snow **Current Favorite Games:** Fight Night Round 3, Tony Hawk's American SkBLand, Guitar Hero, Peter Jackson's King Kong, Amped 3, Call Of Duty 2, Condemned. Criminal Origins (Again)



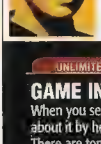
Adam >> *adam@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Alpha Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Strategy, First-Person Shooters, Fighting **Interests:** Perfect Snowball Fight Weather, Finding New Awesome Restaurants To Gorge Myself At, Rediscovering Music From Years Past, *A Feast For Crows*, Electronics That Just Work Like They're Supposed To **Dislikes:** Leading My Team In Kills And Still Losing The Round, Team Killers, In-Game Gold Farmer Spam, Retail Centers During The Holidays, My Totally Defective Cell Phone **Current Favorite Games:** Battlefield 2. Special Forces, World Of Warcraft, Mega Man X Collection, Mario Kart DS, Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos, The Outfit



Joe >> *joe@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Real American Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Adventure, Strategy, Platform, Puzzle **Interests:** More Valkyrie Profile, Hilarious Hate Mail (Thank You, Alliance and Shenmue Fans!), Punching Unel Septim In The Face, The Wrench-Throwing Scene In *Dodgeball* (The Rest Of It Sucks) **Dislikes:** Jaime Lannister And The Things He Does For Love, Murlocs, *Waiting For Mistwalker: An Existential Tragicomedy* By Joe Juba **Current Favorite Games:** Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion, World Of Warcraft, Star Trek: Legacy



Miller >> *miller@gameinformer.com*

Handle: The Once And Future Gamer **Expertise:** RPGs, Action/Adventure, Fighting, Platform, First-Person Shooters **Interests:** Watching Kids Play Mario For The First Time, White Chocolate Take 5 Bars, The Curious Appetites Of People Who Eat Fungus **Dislikes:** Broken Toasters, Month-Long Breaks Between New *Lost* Episodes, Flying While Sick, Descriptions Of Brain Surgery, Poisonous Chip Dip **Current Favorite Games:** Medal Of Honor Airborne, Guitar Hero, Amped 3, Need For Speed: Most Wanted, World Of Warcraft, Gitaroo Man, Call Of Duty 2

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GISPY

Candid Photos From The Seedy Underbelly Of The Video Game Industry





1



2

1 GCI Group's Andrew Wong, THQ's Michael Fitch, and GI Online's Bryan Vore, seen here "hanging tough" **2** Despite the fact he never got a callback after his audition, Joe won't give up his dream of being in the new Dead or Alive movie **3** Kohnke Communication's Eddiemae Jukes, convenience store Jedi **4** Ubisoft's Carlo Delallana, Cindy Lum, and Jeremy give big ups to Prince of Persia! **5** Big-time Cubs fans Reiner and THQ's Rob Cassel, still in denial about the fact the White Sox won the World Series **6** 2K Sports' Anthony Chau and Chien Yu demonstrate new "big ball" mode in Major League Baseball 2K6 **7** Midway's John Podlasek, Reiner, and Mortal Kombat creator Ed Boon hang in snowy Minneapolis **8** Jeremy and Starbreeze's Lars Johansson, Jens Andersson, and 2K's Jason Bergman (middle) strike a heroic pose in the Game Informer offices



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DEAR GI

The Readers Strike Back

PLUMBER GEAR SOLID

It was a nice surprise to see Luigi on the cover of the December issue, stepping out of the shadow of his elder brother. The new art style is certainly very different, but I'm sure I'll get used to it in time just as I did with Link. On skimming your lengthy review of "Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time" (p.80), though, I'm disturbed at the dark tone the series is taking. The graphics are breathtaking (especially for the DS!) but the two plumbers should be leaping through candy-colored fantasy worlds, not skulking in the shadows of ruined buildings. And the huge guns! Whatever happened to water cannons or fire-flowers? Finally, the cigarette clearly visible in Luigi's mouth on page 83 is the last straw: I am not letting my two young children near this game! I knew all along that it was a bad idea for Nintendo to let Hideo Kojima produce this installment. He's very talented, but it's clear he simply doesn't understand the lighthearted innocent fun that Mario means to his fans. I know Nintendo needs to innovate and reach out to teen gamers – and I applaud their lending the Donkey Kong franchise to Michel Ancel, whose new game looks excellent – but in this case they've gone too far. What's next? Princess Peach and Daisy jiggling in thong bikinis in Dead Or Alive Serena Beach Volleyball? (Actually, forget that, I would totally buy that game).



Jens Alfke
San Jose, CA

■ Not every letter we print needs to ask a question or make a point; some are just downright hilarious and worth the read. This is one of them.

OWNED

David Bryant (who wrote to you in "Hardcore Hardship," Issue 152) is a very lucky guy to be concerned about who has the right to call themselves a "gamer." Being what I call a mature gamer (age 75), I am delighted that David isn't troubled about the state of affairs at this point in our history, but instead can address his distaste regarding the people who – not being up to his standards – would dare to call themselves "gamers." I recall being a Navy photographer from 1949 to 1953 covering Harry Truman's police action in Korea, and I hope that as time passes David will come to understand that no one gives a s--- about his opinion.

Tom Barrett
St. Petersburg, FL

■ And with that, Tom Barrett has just won the award for Best Letter Received By Dear GI. Coolest. Reader. Ever.

ANGER QUEST

I am a long-time lover of Dragon Quest, and I am very disappointed with the latest entry. The series has always astonished me with its stylish 2D monsters and wonderful turn-based gameplay. However, the latest entry in this wonderful franchise has been tainted and ruined. It is painfully obvious how much Final Fantasy has changed it. It has forgone the 2D graphics for cel-shading that makes the monsters look bland. Also, instead of having some god-like evil being to fight, a jester is your enemy. Plus, the characters look like they jumped out of Dragon Ball Z and stole the game. Dragon Quest has strayed far from its roots for the chance of being more popular with the football-loving, Mountin Dew-swilling apes that would otherwise not even bat an eye at it.

Danny White
via yahoo.com

■ Dragon Quest VIII is definitely a departure in many ways for the iconic Japanese role-playing franchise, but the intention is probably not to alienate the series' stalwart fans. If the game were meant to be watered-down imitation of previous entries, Level 5 wouldn't have remained true to the series' unforgiving old-school blueprints. Don't feel too betrayed by the artistic changes, either – this is how Toriyama's characters were always meant to look. These alterations probably aren't enough to make the series hit the true mainstream (you can still consider yourself "in the know" about something special); the gameplay and progression are too daunting for your average "Mountain Dew-swilling ape." Thankfully, for the hardcore RPG fan with lots of extra time, they hit a sweet spot that finally gives Dragon Quest a shot a getting the stateside recognition it deserves.

COPY THE COPY

I love the Xbox 360's controller...mainly because it's an outright copy of the PS2 controller. Anyone can realize that the 360 controller is clearly the same, button for button. The Y, B, A, and X buttons mirror the triangle-circle-X-square formation, and the ill-placed and ill-formatted white and black buttons of the current-gen Xbox have been replaced by 'bumpers' which I have lovingly dubbed R1 and L1. I think you get my point.

Jeremy Kern
via sbcglobal.net

■ You know the problem with humans? They're basically outright copies of monkeys. Their arms and legs are in practically the same places, just with a little less hair (except for Robin Williams, who has more somehow). Of course, there might be factors other than immediate physical appearance that we haven't considered, and the same goes for video game controllers. Keep in mind that every new console builds on the successes of those that came before it; apart from analog functionality, the PS2 controller is the exact same as the PSone. When it first released, the PSone controller was strikingly similar to the one for SNES (plus one set of shoulder buttons). However, in addition to adding new knobs and whistles, each generation of controllers becomes more comfortable as well. If you don't believe us, try clutching the NES gamepad for a few hours with those sharp corners sticking into your palms. The gradual merger of ease and functionality over the years is what gave rise to the PS2 controller you so love, and the same process of evolution is what has brought us the familiar yet unique look and feel of the Xbox 360 controller. Not blatant tech theft.

TURNING JAPANESE

I'm reading your November 2005 issue, and after seeing the phrase "No release date has been announced for the U.S." twenty times, I got fed up. Your magazine's UPC has the price printed on it for only three countries: USA, Canada, and the UK. Nowhere is the Japanese price printed, because you aren't a Japanese magazine! So, why do you go to the Tokyo Game Show and report on games that Japanese developers have dubious intentions of bringing stateside? If a company won't tell you when a game will be announced or released in the USA, then you should tell them that they won't get any coverage in your magazine until they do.

Bruce
via dslextreme.com

■ We're not so sure that's a super idea, Bruce. If we were to adopt the philosophy you propose, then games like Final Fantasy XII and Resident Evil 5 would not even exist yet in the minds of our readers, not to mention hardware like the PS3. Just because something doesn't have a firm U.S. release

YEP, BICYCLE SUMO WRESTLING

In your feature about hidden bonus games (Classic Q, Issue 150), how could you you forget to mention the best unlockable game ever: In Mister Mosquito for the PS2, rotate the right analog stick 30 times on the title screen (I'm not kidding) and you can access a hidden bicycle sumo wrestling game. It makes the original Prince of Persia look like...well, the original Prince of Persia. I demand you give props!

[illegible]
via earthlink.net



■ We usually don't give in to demands, but this is pretty hilarious. Surprisingly, despite the fake-sounding instructions, the trick actually works. The Reckless Cyclist game involves two players (so be sure to grab a friend) controlling balding, middle-aged men as they pedal around on top of a mountain and crash into each other. It's just as bizarrely entertaining as it sounds, and fits alongside Mister Mosquito perfectly. It isn't the most complex minigame out there, but it's got dudes falling off a mountain on bikes! What more do you need? Consider props duly dispensed.

Send your comments to Game Informer. Snail Mail: Game Informer Magazine • Attn: Dear GI • 724 North First St., 4th Floor • Minneapolis, MN 55401 Email: deargi@gameinformer.com

JAK X -COMBAT RACING-

JAK COMES IN SECOND. HE DIES.

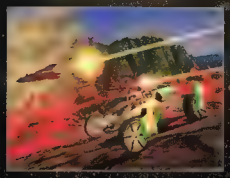
THIRD. HE DIES.

FOURTH. HE DIES.

FIFTH. YOU GET THE IDEA.









TEEN T — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Crude Humor
Fantasy Violence
Language
Use of Tobacco

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date doesn't mean that it can't be a significant part of the industry's current landscape. Gaming is more than just what's available for purchase right here and now; it also involves anticipation and excitement about promising ideas on the horizon. Since video games as we know them have their origin in Japan, it makes sense that some of the more intriguing ideas will start over there before migrating across the ocean. It's our job to cover those developments as they happen and fill you in (we are called "Game Informer," after all). We get just as frustrated as you do by not knowing when or if we'll get to play a particular game, and we've been burned by titles that never make it stateside, but it's still strangely satisfying to know that they're out there somewhere.

SECOND HAND AUTHORITY

I cannot believe you gave True Crime: New York City an 8.75! Other magazines and websites gave the game abysmal scores. Admittedly, I haven't played the game, but for the most part it has been universally panned because of glaring technical issues, lackluster gameplay, and a flimsy storyline. I have to say, the idea of a criminal being sentenced to life as a street cop is absurd. The game seems like another GTA clone with the all-too-popular singular purpose of wreaking havoc on the hapless populace of a city. Anyway, this shockingly high score has made me a little suspicious of your other scores.

Craig Williams
via hotmail.com

We understand that everyone's personal tastes vary, and that there will never be universal agreement on any score assigned to a game in any given issue. In fact, we get dozens of letters as evidence every month from passionate readers crying foul...but there's something fishy about this particular complaint. Amid Craig's chronicling of True Crime's shortcomings is this peculiar sentence: "Admittedly, I haven't played the game." Hmm. In any discussion of a game, is it really possible to formulate a concrete opinion of an entire game without picking up a controller? One can certainly have a perception of the game, but without first-hand experience, that perception can't really coalesce into a valid judgment. You wouldn't trust a review that was written based solely on what an editor read about a game, and disputing a review on the same grounds is a bit silly. Gamers love to debate about the best and worst games out there, but remember that it's not only important to know why the other person is wrong, but also to have information backing up why you're right.

THE STATE OF DENIAL

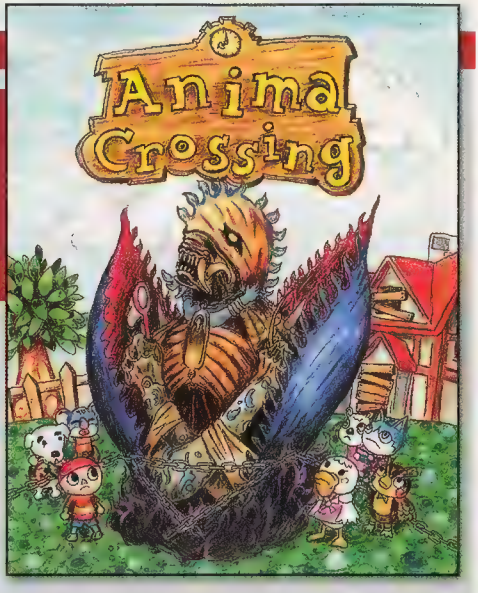
How could you say that the Alliance are dorks? Just because we have naked Night Elves dancing on our mailboxes doesn't mean we are bad. Just you wait: Once you get the Blood Elves, I can guarantee there will be a naked Blood Elf dancing on your mailboxes. So what if the Horde is much better at PvP than the Alliance, you can't expect us to compete against racial traits like Warstomp and Will of the Forsaken. Each side has the same amount of dorks, so let us band together and hate only the ninja looters and corpse campers.

Jawek
via yahoo.com

Oh, don't worry – we hate ninja looters and corpse campers, too. We're just saying it's nice to be able to claim our auction proceeds without getting a faceful of elf-groin. Is that so wrong? Thanks for reminding us about Warstomp and Will of the Forsaken, though. Chalk up two more reasons why the Horde rules.

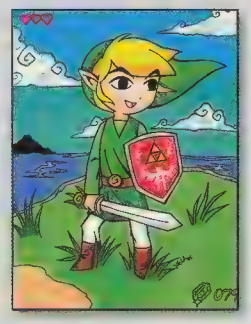
ENVELOPE ART

FEBRUARY WINNER:
STEPHEN VANDERHAAK
Cuddly things and a tortured soul condemned to eternal agony: the perfect match



Enter the Game Informer Envelope Art Contest. All you need to do is draw, paint, scratch, spit, or carve the best darn envelope art you can think of and send it to us. Please include your name, phone number, and return address on the back of the envelope. If you're the monthly winner, we'll feature your work in GI and you'll receive a video game prize from the Game Informer vault.

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Envelope Art Contest
724 1st St. N., 4th Floor
Mpls, MN 55401

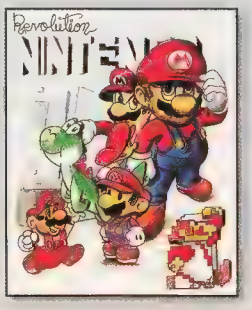


JENNIFER THARP
Three heart containers? Nice knowin' ya, kid



CHAD BORGS-CHATZ
No, we didn't understand the TV show, either. We just remember seeing enough ribcage to last a lifetime

JUAN CARLOS MORALES
It might not be Mario 128, but it's a start





NICK McCURDY
Kratos appears to have misapplied his Breathe-Rite strips. Not on your forehead, dummy!

i play. i win. i gloat. i kick back. i catch a movie.
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XBOX 360 FINDS LOST PLANET

CAPCOM BRINGS INAFUNE EXCLUSIVE TO SYSTEM



Capcom continues to show great support for the Xbox 360 with the announcement of Lost Planet: Extreme Condition. The game is being produced by Onimusha/Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune, who is also bringing his Dead Rising to the system. In addition, his Research & Development division of Capcom is further supplying the 360 (and the PlayStation 3) with Resident Evil 5. Lost Planet is expected to hit at the end of the year.

The game revolves around Wayne – an amnesiac who is searching for the "Green Eye" that is tied to humans' presence on the title's unfriendly, snow-bound planet. Its native dwellers, spider/insect-like beings that range greatly in size – yet are always hostile – fly around and emerge out of the ground to cause havoc. Luckily, your character can use a mech suit for getting around as well as combat. Players can also move Wayne around on foot, and the title will utilize both first- and third-person action. Korean actor Lee Byung-Hun is the basis for Wayne's character model.

Keiji Inafune says that Lost Planet will make full use of the capabilities of Xbox Live, although he would not specify the game's online features.

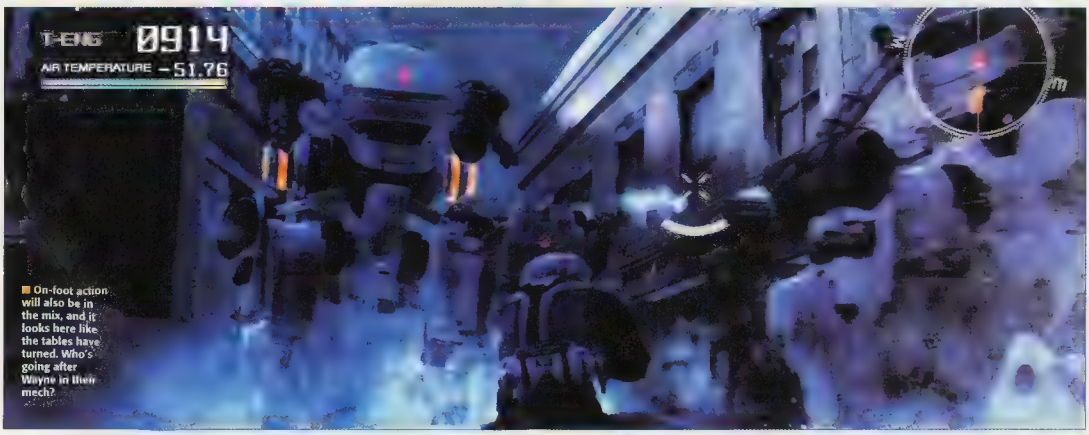


Korean actor Lee Byung-Hun has been cast as main character Wayne



These screens appear to take place on Earth. Is Earth the Lost Planet the game speaks of?





On-foot action will also be in the mix, and it looks here like the tables have turned. Who's going after Wayne in their mech?


HELMET
HEADQUARTERS
LEG
HAND
GUNNER
COLUMN
VEHICLE
GAS TANK
FOREHEAD
ENEMY
SCOUT
DOOR
FENCE
TRUCK
HOUSE
BOMB
BUILDING
GUARD TOWER
CAR
LIGHTS
CHEST
SAFE
NECK
PALLET
GUERRILLA
BARRICADE
BACK
TURRET
TERRORIST
GLASS
THIRD GUN
SNIPER
BAD GUY
CRIMINAL
COMMANDER
INSURGENT


BOARD
COMMANDO
CHAIN
HEADSTONE
GUARD
TRASH CAN
ARM
BARRACKS
GROUND
GUN RUNNER
GATE
HEAD
SOLDIER
TV
BLACK
CRATE
WALL
SHIELD
PILLAR
MERCENARY
SHOULDER
BODY GUARD
MILITIA
ROCK
BRIDGE
TREE

LOOSE TALK

Hot Gaming Gossip



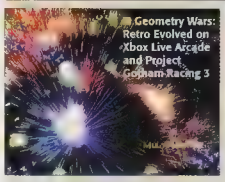
■ Call of Duty 2 for Xbox 360 by Infinity Ward

There's nothing more conspicuous than a developer hiring droves of people to let you know that there's a game on the horizon. Both Rockstar Games and Call of Duty 2 developer Infinity Ward are now scouring for talent. Rockstar has already announced that it has more Grand Theft Auto titles planned for PSP, as well as the next iteration of Red Dead Revolver for PS3. As for Infinity Ward, a Call of Duty 2: Collector's Edition for PC is on the docket, but we certainly look forward to anything else this developer puts out.



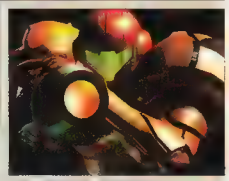
■ Incognito's Warhawk for PS3

In an interview with *PlayStation Magazine*, SCEA executive vice president Jack Tretton hinted at a few possible PlayStation 3 launch titles – Incognito's Warhawk and a dragon-based flight combat title called Lair from Factor 5. Tretton mentioned that SCEA has three games that are currently in development internally.



MORE GEOMETRY WARS

Geometry Wars-mania has taken over Xbox 360 owners. The old school Robotron-like arcade title first appeared in Project Gotham Racing 2, and a new version also came with PGR 3. Now Xbox Live Arcade players are playing it via the Xbox Live Arcade, and we've heard that a third edition of Geometry Wars is in the works. No word on when it might come out, but seeing as how the fourth PGR title is probably a ways off, we bet that the new Geometry Wars will be made available as a download for Xbox 360 fans to enjoy.



METROID DREAD DEAD

DS owners were looking forward to Metroid Dread in 2006, which would have been a return to the series' classic 2D roots. However, a source has told Loose Talk that the game has, in fact, been cancelled. No reason is known for the move, but whatever the circumstances, we wish it weren't true.

SEGA'S REVOLUTION

Nintendo has yet to announce any deals with companies to bring third-party games to the Revolution through its backwards computability function. Recently, however, Nintendo's chief marketing office Reggie Fils-Ame said that Sega is interested in providing old games for the system. Fils-Ame also said the Revolution controller shell would look similar to the GameCube's Wavebird controller.

Got some insider info? Email us at loosetalk@gamefan.com and we'll be all ears.

NAME THAT GAME

Test Your Sight

Even though this month's game was a Japanese-only release for PlayStation, it was a cult hit that prompted some to import the title. It comes from developer NanaOn-Sha and Masaya Matsuura, the people behind the PSone hits PaRappa the Rapper and Um Jammer Lammy. The game featured simple line vector styled graphics and demanded that you jump your character over obstacles that came your way according to the tempo and beat of its songs. You could even have the game generate custom levels by popping in your own CDs.

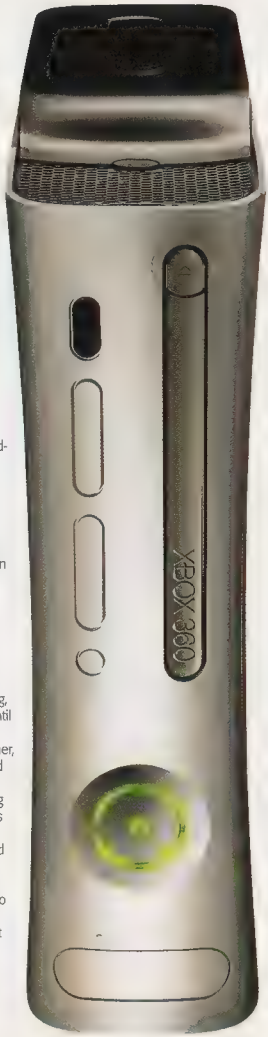
(Answer on page 28)



news

XBOX 360 LAUNCH TEMPERED BY SHORTAGES

GEARS OF WAR, CRACKDOWN DELAYED



Now that the launch of the Xbox 360 has come and gone, the early sales numbers for the system – and some gamer complaints – have surfaced. Unfortunately, the main story of the console's launch is the scarcity of the Xbox 360 itself. Microsoft sent an estimated 400,000 systems out to stores in the U.S. These were all quickly bought through either pre-orders or first-day sales. Microsoft sent out a second shipment of around 300,000 units and says that it is sending units to stores every week.

According to NPD sales numbers, 325,902 Xbox 360s were sold in the U.S. over a period of five days. In comparison, the original Xbox sold over half a million in its first week, and the PS2 sold approximately 531,000 units in the entire month of November. Of course, it's impossible to know how many systems would have been sold if the 360's short supply hadn't been an issue.

The platform's launch in Japan was lackluster, despite the company's best efforts to get a foothold in the country. Only 41,817 units were sold in the first two days, and consumers didn't exhibit the fervor that has marked the releases of previous Japanese systems, such as the GameCube and PlayStation 2.

Software sales for the system were good in America, including a whopping average of 3.9 games sold per system. The NPD says that tens of millions of dollars in titles were sold, with Activision's Call of Duty 2 being the most-purchased Xbox 360 game, followed by EA Sports' Madden NFL 2006. Microsoft's Perfect Dark Zero (developed by Rare) sold the most copies out of the first-party titles. The Limited Edition version of PDZ charted at 21. Four Xbox 360 games landed in the NPD top 25.

One title absent from the platform's launch was Tecmo's Dead or Alive 4. The game was pulled shortly before the November 22 unveiling of the system, and still didn't have a release date at press time. Other titles such as THQ's Saint's Row and Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion also had to miss the launch. Unfortunately, other delays have befallen high-profile 360 games originally thought to be out this spring, with Gears of War and Crackdown both not expected now until this fall at the earliest. In fact, those two games are the only Microsoft first-party titles on the calendar so far. Game Informer, however, has heard that a Shadowrun game is being planned for this summer and more software from the company will be announced early this year. Despite this initial lack of strong first-party support, Microsoft has shored up the original Xbox's early third-party problem. Titles such as Splinter Cell: Double Agent, Fight Night Round 3, and Chromehounds are expected this spring.

Scarcity of supply wasn't the only blemish on what has been widely considered the strongest console launch portfolio for a platform. Reports have circulated of 360 owners having problems including overheating and faulty hard drives. Robert Bryers of Chicago has even filed a lawsuit against Microsoft claiming that the overheating problems the system can encounter are a specific design flaw that the company knew about and ignored. Regardless, Microsoft says that the Xbox 360 is under the three to five percent defect rate that is normal for all consumer electronic products.









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   Catch an enemy in the shoulder and spin him around into the enemy behind him, blow the balcony out beneath another—get creative with your kills.

ALL GUNS BLAZING

MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Strong Language
Violence

XBOX

PlayStation 2

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EA

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THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

When You Want Your News Categorized With A Sarcastic Editorial Spin

GOOD



■ Ubisoft's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow is now available for backwards compatible play on Xbox 360

Microsoft has already updated its list of original Xbox games that can be played on your Xbox 360 via downloadable patches. A number of Tom Clancy games are now available, including Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow and Ghost Recon 2. Microsoft says the backwards compatibility list will continue to grow, but would not say when the update would occur.

GOOD

The French government is scheduled to present a tax credit plan for video game publishers and developers. Earlier in 2005, officials for the French government said that they would take steps to protect the industry after U.S. publisher EA threatened a takeover of French company Ubisoft.



BAD

After cutting out on the Advent Million dollar contest a few months back, publisher Majesco is also dropping licenses. The company has sold The Darkness and Ghost Rider to an unnamed publisher for $8 million. On the bright side, Majesco says that it has trimmed down enough to "pursue additional opportunities."



GOOD

Game Informer just won Spike TV's Viewer's Choice award for the best video game magazine, and we couldn't have done it without your help. Thanks. Now hands off our champagne.

UGLY



Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) and Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) have introduced the Family Entertainment Protection Act, a federal bill which would make it a crime to sell an M- or AO-rated game to a minor, a penalty not placed on any other forms of media. Not only that, but if made law, it would authorize the FTC to run an annual audit of retailers and scrutinize the ESRB ratings board. A similar law in Illinois was struck down by a judge before it could be enacted into law on the grounds that it was unconstitutional.



Fans of PSone's Valkyrie Profile are getting not one, but two titles in the series this year in Japan from Square Enix and developer Tri-Ace. Valkyrie Profile: Silmeria is slated for the PlayStation 2, while Valkyrie Profile: Lenneth is a PSP title that will be a remake of Valkyrie Profile, with extra scenes to be Lenneth and Silmeria together.



WORKING DESIGNS CLOSES ITS DOORS

PRESIDENT TAKES PARTING SHOT AT SONY

Publisher Working Designs has shut its doors and let go of its employees, according to a message from company president Victor Ireland on the publisher's forum. "There's no easy way to say it, so I just will. Working Designs is gone," read the post.

The company started publishing in 1991, and was well known for its localizations of Japanese RPGs, including Growlanser Generations for PS2 and Arc the Lad Collection – both of which took substantial time to hit shelves. Ireland admits that situations like this didn't help the company. "Growlanser Generations sold well, but of course not better than it would have sold as two separate titles. We just spent too much time fighting the good fight to even get it out and [get] other games approved." Ireland also made a cryptic comment on the company's demise, insinuating that Sony may have been involved. "Sony has made it clear that it does not want the details of its dealings with any publisher made public. Suffice it to say that you would buy what we wanted to sell if we could sell it."

Working Designs showed its dedication to its games – and the fans who bought them – not only through its faithful localizations, but by rewarding them with its deluxe packing of its titles. Ireland thanked the fans for making this practice possible. "You have made the difference, because you bought the crazy things we did. Thanks to you, there are deluxe packs, pack-in soundtracks, better packaging, great hint guides, and better localizations in general. We said it a lot, but it really was true. We were nothing without you."

Although Working Designs as a company is done, Ireland says that he and some other ex-members of the staff will work with some publishers at bringing over games. In particular, he praises Xbox 360, and says that the system has some great Japanese RPGs that he wants to help bring over to the States. Finally, Ireland encourages fans to vote with their dollars – much the way Working Designs fans helped the company bring games that would have gone otherwise unnoticed to the public. "It's a tough road ahead for games that aren't of the least-common-denominator variety [sic]. The choices you make with your hardware dollars are more important than ever for the generation that is upon us."

R & D

Game Informer brings the world's worst game ideas to life

Super Saiyan Shonen Naruto Budokai Tenkachi Gundam Gundam!



From what we hear, this "anime" thingy is pretty big with the kids these days. Of course, we have no idea which series is the most popular (we exclusively watch reruns of *Golden Girls*), so we figure that the best way to make a buck off the whole phenomenon is to mash 'em all together. And people also seem to like that Super Smash Bros. dealie, so using it as the basis for our new game seems like a no-brainer. In Super Saiyan Shonen Naruto Tenkachi Gundam Gundam! (or SSSNBTGG to make it easier), players would choose their favorite anime character (including those screamy Dragon Ball guys, big robot Gundam dudes, One Piece pirates, and a bunch of cute puffy animal guys with electric powers and junk), and basically try to kick the crap out of some other player's favorite anime characters. Basically, you would hit a button, your yellow-haired, veiny-necked character would yell out 15 second of gibberish announcing the name of his move, then shoot a fireball the size of the Goodyear Blimp. Then your foes would do the same thing, and somehow one player would eventually emerge the winner. Sure, it would be a pretty terrible game, but hey, it would have anime characters in it! Fans will certainly buy it anyway. Then we'd take the money and go buy more solid gold toilets. Those things are sweet!



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DATA FILE

More News You Can Use

KOJIMA TALKS ON NEW PSP TITLE, ESCALATORS

In his crazy blog, Konami's Hideo Kojima revealed that his development studio is planning a new PSP game which will be directed by Metal Gear Acid 2's Shinta Nojiri. Kojima says that the title will feature a game system "that's different from traditional games." Check out more from the mind of Kojima, including passing people on escalators, over at www.blog.konami.jp/gs/hideoblog_e/



EA BUYS JAMDAT

In a sign that cell phone games are becoming big business, Electronic Arts has come to an agreement to buy mobile publisher Jamdat for $680 million – although a shareholder has filed a class-action lawsuit to stop the merger. The deal will bring together both companies games' portfolios, and EA says that it plans to put out over 50 titles in the next year.



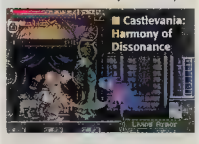
Late last year, Jamdat published Doom RPG for mobile phones

KING'S QUEST IX CONTINUES

Last month we told you that fan developer Phoenix Freeware was told to stop development of King's Quest IX by license holder Vivendi Universal. Well, the two have come to an agreement whereby Phoenix will be able to continue its work on the game, which will be known as The Silver Lining from now on. The first of its three chapters should be out in 2006. The fact that Phoenix can't use the King's Quest moniker suggests that VUG may indeed be bringing the adventure series back.

CASTLEVANIA CLASSICS

Game Boy Advance owners who have yet to own Castelvania: Harmony of Dissonance or Aria of Sorrow are being rewarded for their insolence (why don't you own these yet?!) with a one-cartridge package tentatively called the Castlevania Double Pack. This deal of a lifetime will be available in the first quarter of this year.



Castlevania: Harmony of Dissonance

UBISOFT INVADES PSP

2006 will see a few PSP titles from some of Ubisoft's most popular franchises. Splinter Cell Essentials is a prequel to the first Splinter Cell console game, and it will contain some interesting multiplayer options. Meanwhile, strategy shooter Brothers in Arms makes its handheld debut sometime in the year. An unnamed Xbox 360 title was also mentioned by the company.



Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30 for Xbox

games

MARTINIS AND METHOD MAN ON THE PSP

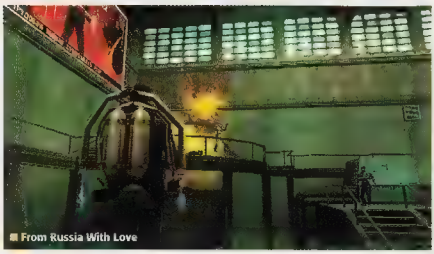
BOND AND DEF JAM HIT THE PORTABLE

James Bond has never taken kindly to comments about having a small unit, but at least now we know it's true. Britain's favorite secret agent is going portable with an appearance on the PSP this March in From Russia With Love. The single-player campaign features eight missions and includes the jet-pack thrills and stealth kills from the console version, along with an assortment of Bond gadgets like the Laser Watch, Q-Dart, and Leopard Piercing Rifle. From Russia With Love also features 16 challenges and multi-player via Ad-Hoc containing deathmatch, team deathmatch, and last man standing.

Similar to From Russia With Love, the handheld version of EA's Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover (also out in March), is not very different from the console version that preceded it. Create-a-Fighter is included, and this PSP edition throws in some new dirty fighting moves among its five fighting styles. The title also includes four new venues, wireless multiplayer, and a roster of 40 stars.



Def Jam Fight for NY: The Takeover



From Russia With Love

news

SONY GOES GUERRILLA

KILLZONE PSP ALSO IN WORKS

Sony gave developer Guerrilla Games and its Killzone title a huge spot at last year's E3 press conference unveiling the PlayStation 3, and now it's giving the Dutch developer a spot at the Sony table. The company has announced that it has acquired Guerilla Games from Media Republic, adding it to its worldwide studio portfolio.

The pair already had a close partnership, as Sony signed the developer to an exclusive publishing deal shortly after the release of Killzone on the PS2. Guerilla previously released ShellShock Nam '67 under Eidos. "As we prepare for the launch of PlayStation 3 next year," said Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios president Phil Harrison in late 2005, "this acquisition strengthens our development portfolio to take full advantage of the exciting entertainment opportunities provided by PSP, PS3, and beyond." Sony has announced that the developer is also working on a PSP title within the Killzone universe.

At E3 last May, Guerrilla's Killzone trailer for the PS3 was the talk of the show – not only for its impressiveness, but whether the clips were real-time or not was the subject of endless debate within the industry



A shot from Guerrilla's Killzone for the PS3

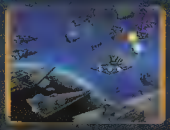
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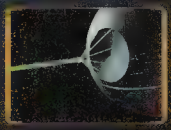


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Game experience may change during online play.

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LUCASARTS

TOP FIVES

Favorites From Industry Pros And GI Readers

DEVELOPER	READER
KYLE PESCHEL	**OMAR LARA**
Producer, Atari's Timeshift	**Upland, CA**





1 **GoldenEye 007 – N64**	1 **GoldenEye 007 – N64**
2 **Street Fighter II: The World Warrior – Arcade**	2 **Metal Gear Solid – PSone**
3 **Final Fantasy VII – PSone**	3 **Metal Gear Solid 2 – PS2**
4 **Super Mario 64 – N64**	4 **Metal Gear Solid 3 – PS2**
5 **Tecmo Super Bowl – NES**	5 **Resident Evil 4 – PS2**

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TOP TEN

Lists...Everybody Loves Lists...

Top Ten Ways To Get Dumped On Valentine's Day

10 Bringing your PSP to a candlelit dinner

9 Going out for a night of dancing...DDR style!

8 Snuggling your 360

7 Giving the gift of Shadow the Hedgehog. That game just sucks

6 The phrase "Raid this tomb, Lara Croft!"

5 Requesting the fulfillment of your "Final Fantasy," involving a kiddy pool of chocolate pudding, a Hooters waitress, and an Aeris costume

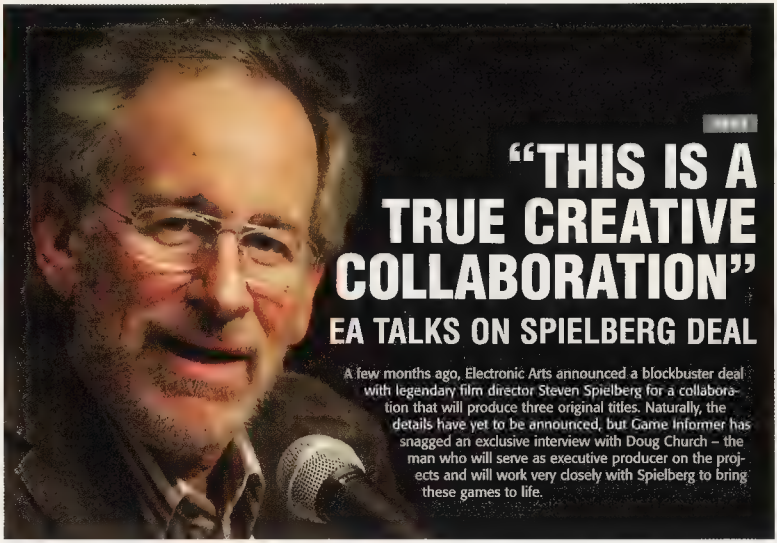
4 Asking your partner to upgrade to next-gen visuals

3 Sending roses to your World of Warcraft guildmates

2 Insisting on being referred to as "Solid Snake," "Mega Man," or "Princess Peach"

1 Telling your partner that they need a few more "experience points" in the ways of love

Name That Game Answer: Vio Ribbon



"THIS IS A TRUE CREATIVE COLLABORATION"

EA TALKS ON SPIELBERG DEAL

A few months ago, Electronic Arts announced a blockbuster deal with legendary film director Steven Spielberg for a collaboration that will produce three original titles. Naturally, the details have yet to be announced, but Game Informer has snagged an exclusive interview with Doug Church – the man who will serve as executive producer on the projects and will work very closely with Spielberg to bring these games to life.

How did this collaboration come about? Did Spielberg approach EA?
Well, EA has a long history with Steven, starting in the DreamWorks Interactive in the '90s, including the creation of Medal of Honor (inspired by *Saving Private Ryan*). Recently, we have both been involved with the USC Interactive Entertainment Program, which has given rise to further discussions about the medium. Given our shared interests and similar visions about the future of this medium, the collaboration has continued to evolve naturally.

How would you characterize the state of the projects at the moment?
Right now, we are in the very early, very exploratory stage. It is an exciting time, there are lots of possibilities, and we want to make sure we take advantage of the creative opportunity. Plenty of ideas won't work out, but that is okay; now is a great time for experimenting.

Did the location of the EALA studio or its technology influence this deal for Spielberg?
For the level of regular collaboration this project will have, being in the same town is pretty important, so that was one factor. There are a few other key factors as well; a shared vision for the medium, a passion for storytelling, and a shared excitement about the creative opportunities that the next-generation technology can open up.

How involved is Spielberg in the projects? Is he penning the story, or does he have gameplay ideas?
The idea is for this to be a true collaboration. He has office space in the studio so he'll be able to sit down with the team for brainstorming sessions, concepting, prototyping, etc. Even at this early stage, he already has story ideas as well as gameplay ideas. The whole idea of collaboration is that we all bring ideas to the table and figure out what would work best, not about splitting up the parts and going off and working on our own.

Has the studio had to invent new tools or engines for these projects? Or will the games use already created technologies?
To be honest, it is going to be a combination of both. It wouldn't be practical for us to reinvent the wheel – building next-gen technology from scratch is a lot of work, and we have quite a bit of that already inside of EA. That said, even in these early stages of concepting, we already have plans for specific areas where we plan to build customized new technology. Adopting the next-gen engines that are finishing soon gives us a big leg up, but layering customized technology for specific design and engineering ideas is how we push things even further.

With video games striving to become more cinematic, do you think this kind of a deal between EA and a Hollywood director will become more common?
I don't know that I'd say that games strive to be more "cinematic" in the traditional sense. Interactivity gives us an inherent capability that makes us unique, and uniquely engaging. However, we are still aspiring to bring emotional narratives that unfold through real play, not in pre-scripted scenes between the play. Hollywood directors like Spielberg, who are master storytellers, can help add more character and story depth to our worlds. We think they have a lot to offer the medium so, yes, hopefully, this is the beginning of a larger trend.

How important is it that this deal encompasses original properties versus licensing an already existing IP?
It is crucial. At EA, licensing IP is now and will probably always be an important part of the product portfolio. But effectively creating new IP is equally important to the company and the game makers, and is 100 percent the focus of this project. Creating new IP presents a huge challenge and an amazing opportunity. By working with someone of Steven's caliber, we are attacking the challenges with one of the world's most creative minds.

Previous directors that EA has worked with, such as Peter Jackson and Francis Ford Coppola, have criticized EA regarding their projects. How is Spielberg's involvement different?
I wasn't at EA then, but what I heard is that aside from one meeting, the Godfather team didn't actually work with Francis Ford Coppola on the game – I'm pretty sure that their agreement is with the studio, not with Coppola directly. As for Peter Jackson, everything I've heard is that it was a really positive experience and everyone enjoyed working with him. Folks around here are still really proud that Return of the King is still the highest-rated movie game. For this project, we are working directly with Steven – not a movie studio – so this is a true creative collaboration.

Jamster

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REAL TONES

Jamster Top 10	real
1) [illegible]	[illegible]
2) [illegible]	[illegible]
3) [illegible]	[illegible]
4) Headstrong - Trapt	real6737
5) I'm Sprung - T-Pain	real6738
6) Stay Fly - Three 6 Mafia	real6739
7) Run It - Chris Brown	real6740
8) [illegible] - Trina	real6741
9) Shake - Ying Yang Twins	real6742
10) Girl Tonite - Twista	real6743
11) Presidential - Youngbloodz	real6744

HOT REAL TONES

	Type
Bat Country - Avenged Sevenfold	real6745
Bet You Can't Do It Like Me - D4L	real6746
Girl Tonite - Twista	real6747
Go Sit Down - Macee	real6748
Here We Go - Trina	real6749
I'm Sprung - T-Pain	real6750
Lovers And Friends - Lil Jon & The...	real6751
Presidential - Youngbloodz	real6752
Run It - Chris Brown	real6753
Shake - Ying Yang Twins	real6754
Stay Fly - Three 6 Mafia	real6755
Unpredictable f. Ludacris - J.Foxx	real6756
(When We) Make Love - Ginuwine	real6757

RINGTONES

Jamster Top 10	poly
1) [illegible]	[illegible]
2) [illegible]	[illegible]
3) [illegible]	[illegible]
4) Gold Digger	poly8368
5) Tubular Bells (Exorcist Theme)	poly8369
6) Don't Cha	poly8370
7) Naked	poly8371
8) Because I Got High	poly8372
9) Candy Shop	poly8373
10) Drop It Like It's Hot	poly8374

FUN SOUNDS

	real
Anybody In There	fun6115
Bleep Generic	fun6116
BlingBling - Textmessage	fun6117
Drunk Tarzan	fun6118
Napoleon Dynamite* - You Have A Txt	fun6119
Mail Mail Mail	fun6120
Old Telephone Ringing 05	fun6121
Offensive Language	fun6122
Police Horn	fun6123
Press Little Button	fun6124
The Crazy Frog - Motor	fun6125
Too Drunk To Ring	fun6126
I Have A Phone Call	fun6127

*Performed by voice artists.

Money Mike

Real Tones

Pimp In Distress	real6758
Time Is Money	real6759
Pimp Apparatus	real6760
Ho On Line 1, 2, 3, 4 & 6	real6761
Pick Up Ya Phone	real6762
99 Problems	real6763

Wallpapers


pic2380


pic2381

GAMES

Worms — GAME1040


Juiced — GAME1041

Paintball — GAME1042


Townsmen3 — GAME1043


Jewel Quest — GAME1044


Johnny Crash — GAME1045

Available for T-Mobile customers.

COLOR WALLPAPERS



pic2340


pic2341


pic2342


pic2343


pic2344



pic2345


pic2346


pic2347


pic2348


pic2349


pic2350


pic2351


pic2352


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pic2370


pic2371



pic2372


pic2373

pic2374

pic2375

pic2376

pic2377

pic2378

pic2379

SOFTWARE

app1040
Face It! - The face tells it all. Find out all you need to know about a person by taking a picture.

app1041
Mobile Watch - The Mobile clock with multiple fun-filled designs!

app1042
Fortune Cookie - Enjoy a new fortune cookie everyday without the calories and mess of Chinese take-out!

app1043
Laser Show - Enjoy a laser-show filled with ultra-cool special effects on your mobile!

app1044
SoundFX Board - Annoying Sound Generator!

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SCREENSAVERS

move2550

move2551

move2552

move2553

move2554

move2555

move2556

move2557

move2558

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DOUG LOWENSTEIN

PRESIDENT, ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION

>> Doug Lowenstein, the longtime president of the Entertainment Software Association, is the voice the industry's interests in Washington and abroad. We recently interviewed Lowenstein, getting his views on a number of issues facing video games, including pending federal legislation regulating the sale of M-rated titles. <<

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1973 ▶ Cub Reporter

After graduating from Washington University (MO), Lowenstein begins work as a reporter at the *Buffalo Courier Express*

1976 ▶ Moving To D.C.



Moving up in his journalism career, Lowenstein takes a job at Cox Newspapers' Washington Bureau

1982 ▶ Capital City



Making the leap into politics, Lowenstein serves under Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-OH), acting as his legislative director for the last two years of his tenure

1982 ▶ A New Chapter



Lowenstein adds "author" to his already impressive resume, writing an acclaimed book, *Lowenstein: Acts of Courage and Belief*, about his late uncle, Allard K. Lowenstein, a renowned civil rights and antiwar activist who was murdered in 1980

1986 ▶ Consulting Days

Lowenstein re-enters the private sector, as a principal at National Strategies, Inc. a Washington public policy consulting firm

1991 ▶ Mass Communications

Lowenstein is appointed to vice president of the communications firm Robinson, Lake, Sawyer, Miller Inc.

1994 ▶ Leading An Industry

esa entertainment software association

Lowenstein becomes the first president of the recently formed Interactive Digital Software Association (since renamed the Entertainment Software Association), where he would staunchly defend video gaming from its critics, and help make the E3 convention the industry's most important yearly event

For some of our readers that don't follow the industry closely, what is the Entertainment Software Association and what are the core functions of your organization?
Well, the ESA is what we call a trade association, which is a collection of companies in an industry that come together to work on issues of common interest and concern, typically in the business and public policy arena. ESA is a trade association made up of companies that publish video games for all platforms … We run programs in a variety of areas from government relations to E3 to, of course, our self-regulatory body, the Entertainment Software Rating Board. We have an anti-piracy enforcement program, which operates domestically and around the world to bring legal actions and conduct investigations on activity that infringes on our members' intellectual property rights. We're the voice and spokesperson for the industry.

How much of a potential bureaucratic nightmare for the industry is this bill if it passes?
Well, I think it's pretty nightmarish in the sense that I'm not sure, with a nation at war, with terrorism, with all manner of crime facing our country, whether it's a particularly good use of law enforcement to be running around seeing if retailers are selling games to minors. I haven't really looked at whether they've even looked at how the provision is to be enforced. But, I think, in the end, if the bill were to pass, we would immediately challenge it on constitutional grounds, and I'm reasonably certain that it would be struck down and never go into effect. Part of the problem with the bill is that, while we appreciate the fact that they want to put our rating system into law, that's exactly one of the reasons that it's constitutionally problematic. They've essentially converted ratings into something that has criminal liability associated with it, and the government can cede its governmental authority to a private entity such as the ESRB.

Although the ESRB ratings have been praised, recently the National Institute for Media and Family gave the industry an "F" for having what they felt were misleading game ratings. How do you respond to that?
First of all, if you look at the NIMF's own ratings that they issue on their own website, they are in agreement with the ESRB ratings virtually all the time. When they disagree, they usually disagree by a year – like they think it should be 18 versus 17 or 14 versus 13. Well, to condemn the entire rating system because you think a game ought to be rated for 18 instead of 17 is really kind of silly. Because no developmental psychologist will tell you that there's a big difference between 17 and 18. So, what you really have here is an agenda on the part of the NIMF, which is to try to force games into the "Adults-Only" category, because retailers have made it clear that they won't carry those games…. The ESRB has consistently found that parents are in accord with their ratings almost 80 percent of the time, which is a pretty good batting average in a pluralistic society with people who have wildly different values and morals. At the end of the day, they have to give us an "F," because "A's" don't win headlines.

Last year, the Grand Theft Auto "Hot Coffee" scandal was a very sensational incident. How much damage in terms of public perception of our industry was done by that controversy?
Certainly, it did a tremendous amount of damage to the image of the industry and to the ESRB. That was extremely unfortunate. Until that controversy came, Senator Clinton was not particularly interested in regulating video games. In several states where there was legislation pending, those bills were less likely to pass. After Hot Coffee, they got renewed momentum, because it became easier to "pile on" in the wake of all the controversy. At the same time, it's important that most fair-minded people were also very complimentary with how the industry and the ESRB handled it. Senator Clinton's and Senator Lieberman's statements both offered high praise to the ESRB for handling the matter in an aggressive and effective way. I haven't heard anybody yet tell me of a time when an industry compelled one of its own companies to withdraw a product from the marketplace.

Our rating system has won a lot of praise, but obviously the movie ratings are much more established and well known. Would you ever consider adopting that system for games?
Well, I think that right now we're committed to the system we have, but it would be narrow-minded to say that something's forever. If and when it might make sense to find a way to bring systems together on a common basis, we'd want to look that. I wouldn't rule it out, but right now we're comfortable with what we have and people understand it.

Ten years from now, if not sooner, we're going to have people in Congress…who grew up playing Grand Theft Auto

Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman recently announced the Federal Entertainment Protection Act, which seeks to federally regulate the sale of Mature-rated games. Was that something you saw coming?
We've seen it coming for awhile. I think it's kind of funny that its acronym is "FEPA," which is one letter off from "FEMA," and we've all seen what a disaster FEMA is. [Laughs] Senator Clinton made it clear back in the summer that she wanted to introduce legislation along these lines. We've had a good, constructive dialogue with her as to why we differ with her conclusions. On the one hand, we were pleased that she has publicly praised the industry for its self-regulation. But, that doesn't outweigh the fact that the fundamental objective of the bill is to ban the sale of games based on their content, and that's a principle that we must oppose, because it infringes on the constitutionally protected rights of our members.

Obviously, some of this new legislation would put constraints and penalties on games that aren't there for any other media. Do you think some of these issues will go away as people that grew up gaming gradually come into positions of power in the government?
It's not even a question – they will go away. Ten years from now, we will not be having this conversation, or most of this conversation. It is entirely generational; it's entirely typical. Older generations always attack the media of the generations that follow. Ten years from now, if not sooner, we're going to have people in Congress and state legislatures and editors of newspapers and producers at television stations who grew up playing Grand Theft Auto. Somehow, they will find themselves in positions of responsibility and power and they will have done it in spite of the fact that they played games that their elders said would lead them down the road to ruin. Many of the politicians who criticize the industry grew up with their parents telling they couldn't listen to the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane and any other of number of other groups that were going to lead you down the path of degradation.



Photo: Peter Krogh

LEADING THE INDUSTRY

ESA President Doug Lowenstein is leading the charge against federal regulation of video games



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AREA-51 M5700 AND M5500

Manufacturer: Alienware **Website:** www.alienware.com
List Price: starts at $1,499 (m5700); $1,049 (m5500)



Shifting its focus a bit, over-the-top gaming PC manufacturer Alienware recently introduced two new Centrino-based laptops: the m5700 with a 17-inch screen and the m5500 that offers a 15.4-inch display. Like all Alienware products, the specifics are highly customizable, but the lighter weights, smaller price tags, and more subdued styling in comparison to their high-profile gaming lines might make these desktop replacements easier to swallow for more conservative (or business-minded) consumers. The company is also running some sweet deals through their website, so head there first for big savings.

SKIN NEO PSP CASE

Manufacturer: iSkin
Website: www.iskin.com
List Price: $49.99

Known for stylish yet totally functional iPod cases, manufacturer iSkin is jumping into gaming with a great PSP holder. The leather Neo case comes in a handful of colors, converts into a sturdy stand, and has velvet-lined storage for the unit, slots for memory sticks, and a back compartment that holds UMDs, but allows users to switch disks without taking it out of the case.



Shown with PSP, not included

Tablet

770 INTERNET TABLET

Manufacturer: Nokia
Website: www.nokiausa.com/770
List Price: $359.99

Don't be alarmed – this Nokia set isn't a phone at all. Instead, it's basically a cheap laptop replacement for tasks like web surfing, email, and using Internet media like downloaded videos or music. Running a variant of Linux, the 770 lets users manage these basic tasks with quick controls and a bright touchscreen. Stash it on the coffee table to let the web quickly settle bets about which Smallville cast members were also in the embarrassing *House of the Dead*.





■ This is a concept we can get behind – making in-car gaming more than opening your trunk after West Coast Customs had its way with it

etc

URGE CONCEPT CAR

Manufacturer: Nissan
Website: www.nissanusa.com
List Price: TBA

Debuting at the 2006 North American International Auto Show, Nissan's Urge concept car is a high-futurist's take on the company's Z Roadster. Although it isn't confirmed if the Urge will go into production, the concept unit has an interesting 360 tie-in. One of Microsoft's new consoles is installed in the car's trunk and, when the ignition is turned off and the car is in park, players can use the steering wheel and pedals to play 360 games on the visor-mounted LCD screen.



etc

XBOX 360 SKINS

Manufacturer: FaceTags **Website:** www.facetags.com
List Price: $9.99

Customization is a big push for 360 and a lot of smaller companies are getting on the bandwagon. FaceTags, for one, gets designs from a handful of lesser known, but highly creative illustrators to make an eclectic mix of options. The lower price versus a Microsoft plate is because these are reusable vinyl decals, and not replacement faces. FaceTags should have their most interesting option set up soon – a web application that will let users design their own skin with text and a self-supplied image.



peripherals

GEL TABZ

Manufacturer: Gel Tabz **Website:** www.geltabz.com
List Price: $5.99

Coming in packs of two, these squishy silicone caps cover the top of analog sticks on the PS2, Xbox, and 360 controllers. We tried them out on some tired PS2 controllers and found the covers to be a really nice addition, although the graphics could still use some work. Future plans call for new colors and GameCube-compatible models.

Shown on PS2 controller, not included



tech

HARMONY ADVANCED UNIVERSAL REMOTE FOR XBOX 360

Manufacturer: Logitech
Website: www.logitech.com
List Price: $129.99

The Harmony remote control lineup from Logitech has one very specific goal: to make running your entertainment system almost mindless. Their 360 remote in the series is no exception, as it uses the same technology as their other remotes while adding Xbox-specific buttons and pre-loaded console settings. It also supports complex macros that, with one button push, will change your setup from DVD watching to game playing (including audio and video inputs), for example.





OR FORNOST

OR ETTENMOORS

OR THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

OR RIVENDELL

OR MISTHLOND

OR THE SHIRE

OR MORIA

OR ISENGARD

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PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

TEEN T Fantasy Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



BY MATT HELGESON,
SENIOR EDITOR,
GAME INFORMER MAGAZINE

SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

RETHINKING JACK THOMPSON AND THE VIDEO GAME VIOLENCE DEBATE



Jack Thompson is an idiot. Actually, that's not entirely accurate; the infamous critic of our industry is much too savvy and successful to be an idiot. He's certainly reckless, vain and petty, prone to making inflammatory and misleading statements to any media outlet that will lend him an ear. Unfortunately, his shock tactics do a disservice to the cause he claims to support. More importantly, he makes it far too easy for both the industry and the gaming press to write off the entire issue of video game violence as nothing more than a scare tactic devised by an opportunistic ambulance chaser.

If you read Game Informer, I imagine that we can agree on a few givens in having a conversation about violence in games. One, video games are an art form – one that should be protected under the free speech provisions of our constitution. Two, any attempts to ban games based on content is fundamentally wrong. Three, game makers should not be liable for the behavior of disturbed individuals that may or may not have played or been influenced by their games.

All this said, I think there is a discussion about the effects that violence in games has on its audience and the art form that needs to happen. The research on media violence is often muddled, poorly conceived, and widely varying in its findings. Right now, I don't feel that anyone has sufficiently proven a real correlation between playing violent games and an increased propensity towards violent behavior.

However, that doesn't mean that games couldn't have unintended effects on their audience. We simply don't know. It's not inconceivable to me that some gamers might become more aggressive after long sessions of violent gaming. Does this mean that I'm suddenly going to go out and kill pedestrians after playing Grand Theft Auto? Of course not. As an adult, my behavior and values are largely formed. However, I have to admit that particularly frustrating parts of games have made me feel real anger, if only for a brief period of time. For a troubled kid in a bad family situation with no support system, it seems possible that an unhealthy obsession with a violent game might be a factor in him or her acting out in a negative manner.

Typically, the industry and press have reacted to critics like Thompson with equal vehemence – decrying outright any claims that games could negatively effect their audience. As such, the discourse has been limited to nothing more than a barroom argument, with both sides resorting to name-calling and lobbing slanted statistics back and forth. The question of how and why video games affect gamers is far more complex than this, and important enough to be explored with adult, reasoned discussion. As an industry, game companies need to take their responsibility to their fans, and society as a whole, more seriously. By really listening to our critics (at least the ones that are capable of a respectful dialogue), we just might learn something.

Even more importantly, the industry needs to re-examine its dependence on violence if it wishes to truly grow as an art form. Although there are certainly numerous exceptions, video games are, by and large, an incredibly violent medium. Too often, game design involves coming up with new ways to place characters in a virtual world, put a weapon in their hands, and give them things to kill. Ultimately, this dependence on violence is limiting the creativity of the developers that make games. By thinking beyond the traditional, combat-based, adversarial relationship between the player and the game world, developers might come up with new and unknown gameplay concepts.

> **Ultimately, this dependence on violence is limiting the creativity of the developers that make games.**

This doesn't mean that great games can't be violent – God of War and the Grand Theft Auto series both did tremendously innovative work while being extremely bloody. Still, I think it's interesting to note that some of the most creative games I've seen in the past year or so, like Will Wright's Spore, Nintendogs, Lumines, Katamari Damacy, and Psychonauts, all come up with ways to involve the player with a game beyond just committing acts of violence. Whether it's Katamari's strange humor or Spore's placing the tools to create life in your hands, these games manage to do truly new things. And, it's at least partially due to the fact that these artists have looked beyond the usual "guy with a gun" design paradigm. Violence, when done the right way, will always have a large place in video games, but violence for the sake of violence represents just another artistic dead-end.

So, while the industry should fight for its rights of free speech and contest legislation like the bill recently proposed by Hillary Clinton and Joe Lieberman, I also think that we need to make sure that we don't allow our passion as gamers to blind us to all reason. If we assume that our medium isn't capable of impacting our world in a negative manner; if we assume that because our industry is so successful that we don't need to conceive of new ways to grow our art form; if we give in to our impulse to shout down any criticism of our industry; if we assume that we are always right and our enemies are always wrong – well, then we're no better than Jack Thompson. And that's certainly not company that I want to be in. ■■■

The views and opinions expressed on this page are strictly those of the author and not necessarily those of Game Informer Magazine or its staff.

If you work in the industry and would like to share your opinion, contact senior editor Matt Helgeson at matt@gameinformer.com


One does not simply walk into Mordor.

february

sun	mon	tue	wed	thur	fri	sat

01

NEW RELEASES
- Anarchy Online: Lost Eden – PC
- Auto Assault – PC
- Dishonored 2 – PS2
- Greg Hastings' Tournament Paintball Max'd – PS2, PSP
- Guilty Gear: Dust Strikers – DS
- Guilty Gear: Judgement – PSP

02

- Iuka and the Monophonic Menace – GBA
- Pursuit Force – PSP
- Scurge: Hive – DS, GBA
- SpongeBob SquarePants: Yellow Avenger – PSP
- Stacked – PS2, PSP
- Teen Titans – PS2, GC
- Winx Club – PS2

03

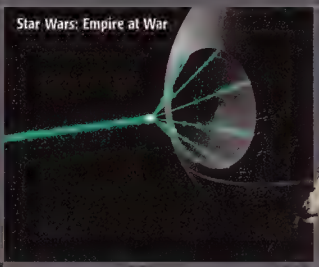
The wonderfully titled *Hellboy: Makaraan, or A war told by a Mummy in the New York City City Explorers' Club on August 15, 1993* #1 hits comic stores today. This tale is penned by Mike Mignola, and drawn by Richard Corben of *Heavy Metal* fame.





07

NEW RELEASES
- *Doom* – DVD, UMD
- King of Fighters: [illegible] – PS2
- [illegible] – PS2
- [illegible] – PS2
- Star Wars: Empire at War – PC
- Street Fighter Alpha 3 MAX – PSP
- War of the Worlds – PC



10



11

Actor John Ratzenberger, best known as Cliff Clavin from *Cheers*, is immortalized in plastic today. Not as someone slouched in front of a bar, but as battle-hardened Major Bren Derlin from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*.





13

Final Destination 3 opens in theaters. Fans of overly-complicated, Rube Goldberg-style death scenes everywhere rejoice, especially us. What can we say? We've got a mean streak.



Final Fight: Streetwise

15

NEW RELEASES
- Dungeons & Dragons Online – PC
- Fight Night Round 3 – 360, PS2, Xbox
- Final Fight: Streetwise – PS2
- Grandia III – PS2
- Half-Life 2: Aftermath – PC
- Heroes of Might & Magic V – PC
- Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure – PS2, Xbox, PC

16

- Mega Man Anniversary Collection – GBA
- MVP 06 NCAA Baseball – PS2, Xbox
- Resident Evil: Deadly Silence – DS
- Saw 2 – DVD
- Teen Titans – PS2, Xbox, GC

17

SUPERMAN VS SUPERMAN

Nuff said. The battle you've all been waiting for is finally here. Who will win? Pick up your copy of *Infinite Crisis* #6 to find out!

18

GENGHIS CON XXVII (16-19)

If Genghis Khan were around today, his base of operations would be the Hyatt Regency Tech Center in Denver, Colorado. If playing board, card, or role-playing games is your thing, or if you enjoy spending your days painting pewter miniatures, then head on over to this convention.

19

Hey Mr. Bowie, Tina Turner called. She wants her hair back. Oh, and Miller wants his pants back, too. He said you [illegible] from *Labyrinth* should be available [illegible] today!



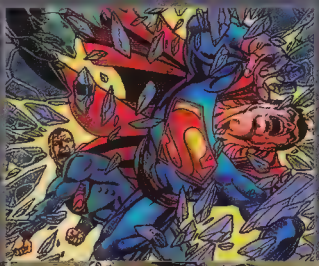


21

Marvel's Ultimate Avengers: The Movie releases on DVD today! Captain America, The Hulk, Iron Man, Wasp, Giant Man, and the most popular superhero of them all, Thor, strut their world-saving stuff in this must-see animated film.

22

NEW RELEASES
- Def Jam – PSP
- Full Auto – 360
- Sonic Riders – [illegible], Xbox, GC
- Tamagotchi – DS
- TOCA Race Driver 3 – PS2, [illegible]



25

MEGACON (24-26)

We genuinely view ourselves as nerds. We have nothing to hide. After hearing about MegaCon, however, we now think that we are studs. Who in their right mind would pay to get autographs from second tier actors from Babylon 5? If you fall into this geek-defining category, head to the convention center in Orlando, FL.

26

CAPCOM GIRLS COLLECTION CHUN-LI STATUE

[illegible] in at 9.85 inches and retailing for $159.99, this beautifully sculpted Chun-Li is the perfect piece for any Street Fighter nut.



27



28

NEW RELEASES
- Black – PS2, Xbox
- Field Commander – PSP
- Fifth Street 2 – PS2, Xbox
- Generation of Chaos – PSP
- Jaws – PS2, Xbox
- MLB 06: The Show – PS2, PSP
- Neopets: Petpet Adventures – The Wand of Wishing – PSP
- Tales of Legendia – PS2
- Worms – PSP

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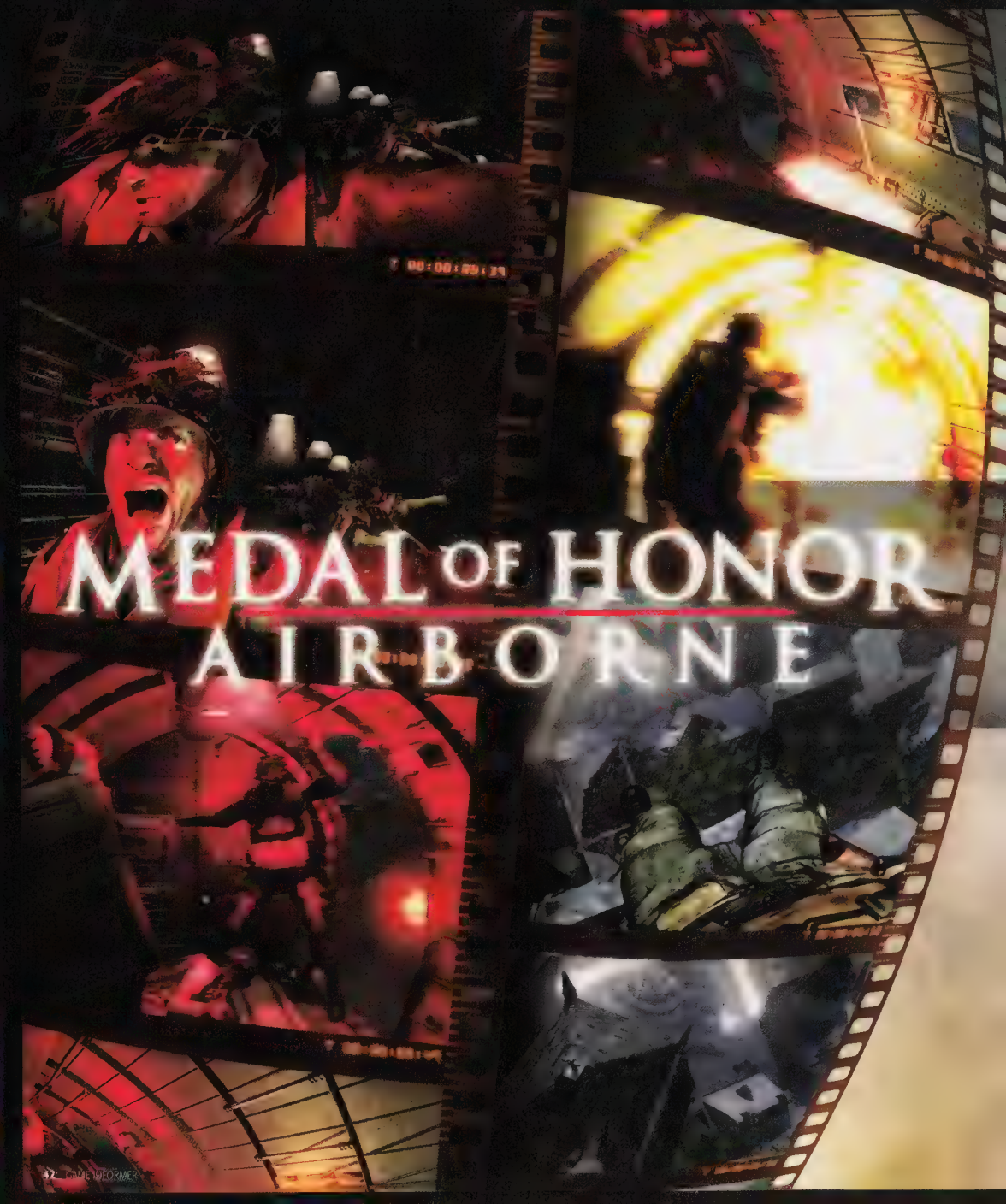
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MEDAL OF HONOR
AIRBORNE



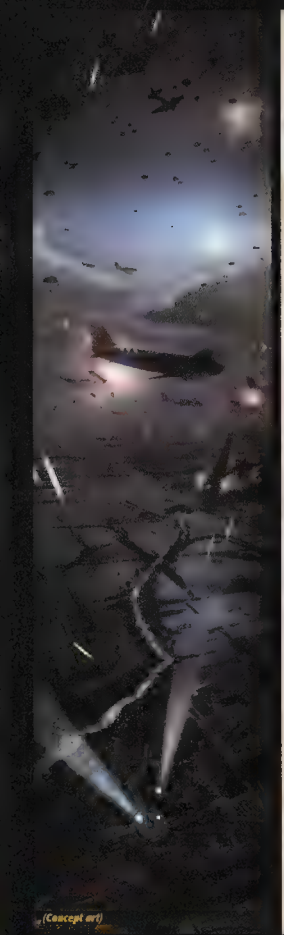
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> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** EALA
> **RELEASE** WINTER

(Note: All images shown are in-game screenshots unless otherwise noted)

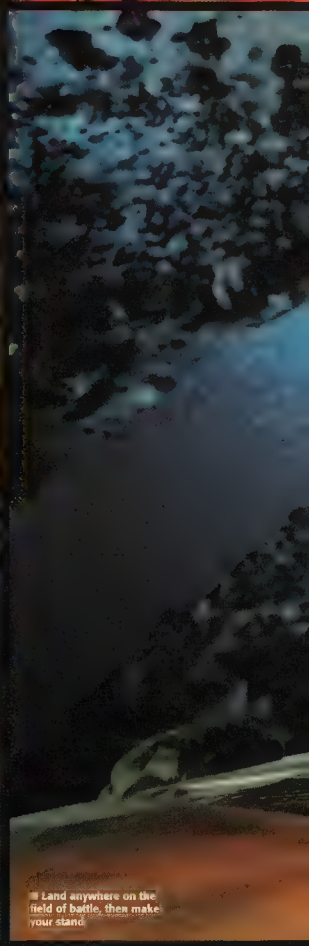
CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

As you near the drop zone, tension is etched in every man's face through the stark glow of the red jump light. Over the tumult of the plane's engines and the beginnings of gunfire far below, you hear the jump master shout. "Get ready. Check equipment. Sound off." Each of your comrades in turn voices their okay as the sergeant in front of you turns to speak. "Okay, this is the real deal now!" The rip of bullet against metal tears through the hull of the transport. Closer to the door, a buddy loses his cool. "We can't jump in this..." The rest of his words are drowned out as a huge explosion wracks the left side of the plane and a fireball engulfs the jump door. Where a man once stood is now empty space. Whether you're over the DZ or not, it's time to go. As you fling yourself from the now burning wreck, the cool night air is split by hundreds of tracer bullets from the lush French farmland below. With your chute deployed, you try to steer clear of the largest encampment of heavy guns – your rapid descent bringing the town church ever closer. With a jolt your legs smash into the slats of the roof, and shingles fly away as you tumble towards the edge. The chute snags as you slip off, and you're thrown hard against stained glass. In the market square below, shouted German warnings turn your way, and rifles come up. Fumbling for your weapon, you lay down a spray of fire. Around the corner a German tank rolls out, barrel rising in your direction. You furiously pull your knife and cut the chute's lines as the Panzer fires. On the ground below, you barely have time to roll over as a two ton chunk of granite hurtles down.



(Concept art)





This was our first glimpse of Medal of Honor Airborne – a video combining running interactive game software and target footage exhibiting Renderware on the PlayStation 3. Don't take our word for it; you can view the whole sequence in the screenshots that fill the previous two pages. It's a fresh start for a franchise and a genre long overdue for something new. More than that, it's a game with tremendous ambitions tied to it. So many technical and gameplay innovations govern the project that it feels like an entirely new approach to first-person shooting. Other games introduced us to next-generation gaming. The last year alone has seen some phenomenal innovations in the World War II shooter genre. But this newest installment of the celebrated Medal of Honor series wants to show us what that next generation can really do. At least, that's the sentiment of the growing team of developers who have settled in at the sprawling EALA campus to begin work on the game. As we emerge onto the floor devoted to the title, WWII memorabilia lies enshrined in the corridors and detailed weapon diagrams cover the walls. We're greeted by Patrick Gilmore, executive producer on the project, a long time veteran of the franchise. He smiles enthusiastically as we begin to talk about the new game. Eager to show us everything at once, he tells us of brand new conceptual directions in animation, visuals, enemy AI, and level design. His enthusiasm is infectious as he walks us among his team leads, a group composed largely of fellow veterans of the series. As we begin to question and explore the wealth of new ideas the team has to share, one thing becomes more and more clear. Medal of Honor is in for a big change.

"I think what's really important is the personal experience against the backdrop of history," Gilmore relates. "We're very focused on getting closer to the human drama – the idea that an ordinary person can become a hero in the right environment. We want to find the one guy whose arc through World War II was the most inspiring to participate in." In this case, that hero is a man named Boyd Travers, a young soldier in the U.S. Army who opts for the extra 50 dollars a week in pay to join America's first airborne force. Travers is the consummate soldier. well trained, multilingual, honor bound, and into long odds. While Travers may be fictional, the unit he served in definitely isn't. The 82nd Airborne Division was and continues to be one of the most celebrated groups in American military history. "A lot of WWII games have adopted a 'greatest hits' mentality. What we wanted to do was to find a more linear thread through the game in terms of the story we're telling," Gilmore told us. Following the history of one group of soldiers offers exactly that opportunity. Dropped behind enemy lines again and again throughout the Second World War, the 82nd repeatedly faced superior enemy numbers and tremendous losses, accomplishing mission after mission without relinquishing ground. It's this true life story that is the real focus of the new Medal of Honor, tracing the intricately detailed history of the Division as it moved from one operation to another throughout the European Theatre of combat.

It's a history that begins with Operation Husky in July of 1943 – the Allied invasion of German-held Sicily was the initial step in the Allies' retaking of Europe. It was the first major airdrop for the 82nd Airborne, and a hard one at that. Strong winds had scattered the dropping aircraft, and whole groups of soldiers were displaced far from their rally points. Those who

(continued on pg. 46)



"We experience the Nazi's struggle for supremacy through the eyes of the Airborne," story writer and design director Jon Paquette explains

Land anywhere on the field of battle, then make your stand



This PlayStation 3 screen shows off the game's dynamic use of color, light, and shadow to establish the mood and tension of a scene

Every level opens with a fully interactive and controllable airdrop

LIVING THE GAME

Recently, 11 members of the Medal of Honor Airborne development team took a trip to a ranch in Boulevard, CA to capture new audio samples for use in the game. The high fidelity recordings will be used to replicate the authentic sounds of these World War II weapons in action. We're pretty sure none of these guys had any fun while they were there.





(continued from pg. 44)

survived Husky and the battles that followed would eventually participate in Operation Neptune, the all-important taking of Normandy, seen in this game not from the eyes of a beach-storming seaman, but instead from the squads who parachuted in to attack the enemy from within during the largest airdrop in world history. It was this titanic conflict that our initial game demo exhibited. The crucial bridge-taking of Operation Market Garden, the assault amid the ancient ruins of Salerno in Operation Avalanche, and even the daring spearhead across the Rhine River of Operation Varsity – every battle depicted in the game forms a crucial link in the conflict that eventually brought Nazism to its knees.

To do justice to these historical benchmarks, the team at EALA couldn't possibly rest on its laurels. Entire archives of video and audio material had to be scrapped, since their resolution and fidelity simply wasn't up to the demands of the PS3 and Xbox 360. To begin the rebuilding process, half a dozen team members took an extended trip to Europe. In the process, they visited the pockmarked stone walls and buildings that once bore witness to so many battles. Forty gigabytes of photos and 11 hours of video footage returned with them to the studio, to be examined and brought to life for the game. Extensive cooperation with historical consultant Marty Morgan from the National D-Day Museum meant daily briefings to explain the details of each real life battle. The effort for authenticity is a constant pressure.

Nonetheless, historical accuracy does not a good game make, and certainly isn't enough to impress the wide fan base who have come to expect such detail from the genre. It is instead in the sweeping changes to gameplay convention that the MoH team hopes to set their game apart. The concept of an airborne game is more than a gimmick. It's a radical shift in the structure of a first-person shooting title. "Every single mission begins with an airdrop that is not a cinematic." Gilmore explains. "It is something that you are one hundred percent in full control of. That became the theme of the game. The first step is everything. How do you make this a game that is fundamentally about player choice and player freedom? There's perhaps no greater hallmark to the next gen than the idea that you're engaging in worlds that are full of action and adventure but you're not following a set, scripted linear path. I think games really need to move beyond that."

Think about it. If you jump out of a plane above a battlefield, you can direct your parachute to any number of landing points below you. Now consider almost every FPS that has come before. Imagine if your character could spawn anywhere on the field. More than that, what if you could begin not only at some set point on the ground, but on a roof, in the branches of a tree, or floating down into a nest of enemy gunners? This is the challenge facing the creators of Medal of Honor Airborne. Gone are the days where the designers could pick a player's starting point and hide enemies behind the rock ahead of them, because the player might very well decide to land entirely



■ Game designer Kevin Mack filled us in on the flexibility of the AI and surrounding world: "You can really do whatever you want in these environments. You can't break it by doing the wrong thing."









behind that rock. Every piece of architecture in the world must be real and interactive, even to the highest church steeple. "Crashing through the window of a church is going to be really difficult to do. But you can do it!" exclaims Gilmore. "And if you've done it, you may be able to surprise your enemy in a way that you couldn't by just landing on the ground." In such a vast interactive world, how do you give players dramatic choices that actually change the flow of the game, but still maintain a cohesive package?

You start out with a totally rethought approach to artificial intelligence. Most modern FPS games include enemies who are smart enough to hide behind cover, find your location, and shoot. Their limits are based around the idea that each of them spawns and stays generally where they are placed by the developer. The height of current generation AI introduces flanking enemies that move from their starting point to engage you from the side or behind. These ideas simply don't work if the player can show up directly behind the encamped foe, or if the player begins to drop grenades or bullets from 50 feet above. To adjust, the seasoned developers have crafted what they call the affordance engine. In war, generals refer to an affordance as anything that gives the soldier an advantage in battle. Simply put, to hold an affordance increases the chance of victory. As a grunt on the ground, anything that keeps you alive one second longer is an affordance, from the slimmest tree that might catch a bullet, to the sturdy farmhouse with a great vantage point across the countryside.

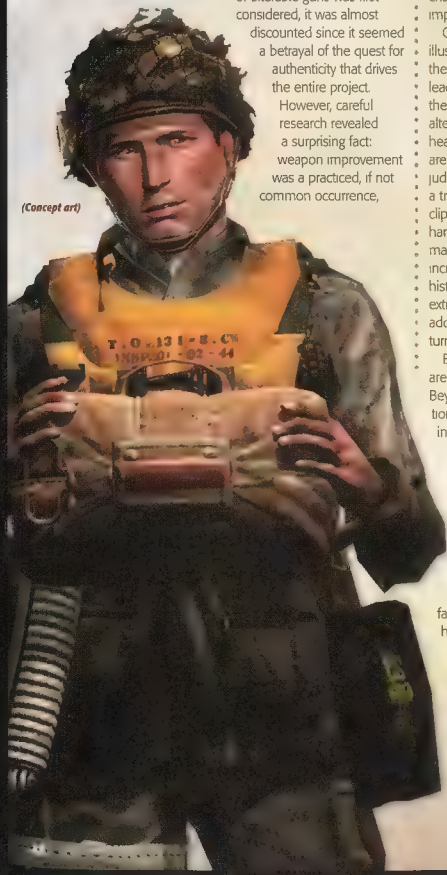
In Medal of Honor Airborne, every discrete area on the battlefield is ranked with a sequence of values. The primary score tells the artificial intelligence of both allies and enemies how important a given target is. For instance, a copse of trees might have only moderate worth. A secondary score dictates its value in proximity to other valuable spots. If the wooded area is alone in a field, its value is less than if that bunch of trees sits right by a high stone wall. Finally, every affordance zone has a variable score that changes with the number and strength of opposing forces holding that area, as well as changing aspects of the environment. For instance, an intact building might be very important until someone manages to set it on fire, which changes the entire equation. When you arrive on the scene of battle, every single computer controlled character, whether friend or foe, is attempting to evaluate these factors and act accordingly. "The AI knows the value of different things in the environment, and they are constantly moving to improve their position so that they can fight against you more effectively," Gilmore asserts. The result is a chaos of onscreen action, movement, and maneuvers as squads cooperate and work together to search and destroy.

We were shown an early depiction of the system in action by software engineer Tim Ford. In an early patchwork level, he dropped a dozen German soldiers at one end of the battlefield. Immediately identifying a large multi-floor building as the most important place to hold, a team immediately deployed to the inside doors and windows, while another squad split off to cover the entrance from a nearby embankment. At this point, a contingent of American GIs was dropped into the scene. Acting independently, they split into suppression and fire teams, first to flank and take out the outlying Nazi guards, and then to assault the building. Superior numbers carried the day, and the Americans emerged victorious – at the death cry of the last German, the surviving Americans immediately fanned out to hold the newly earned ground. Viewing this entire scene first from a wide overhead perspective, we then switched into a first person view, adopting the role of one of the attacking Americans. Both opposing teams were constantly weaving across the field of battle, always advancing through the flurry of gunfire and rapid movement.

Historical study of Nazi troop training revealed to the team an interesting fact. German soldiers were incessantly taught to keep moving at all times; a still soldier was a dead one. To this end, German AI in the game has been particularly set up to express this training. If the zone they are protecting isn't too important to leave, enemy soldiers will literally hunt you through the level until one of you is dead or you lose them. Just as WWII veterans fearfully relayed in later years, players will experience the eerie sight of Nazi troops as they flit from tree to tree in a dark forest, or move down a rubble strewn street towards you. Enemies will be completing their own tasks when you

arrive instead of patiently awaiting you behind a wall, whether you come from above or sneak in on them along the ground. The brief seconds of surprise you might be able to achieve can often change the course of a fight. At first, foes will dive for the nearest cover. If two reach the shelter of a doorway, but one is left in the relative open behind a small barrel, he'll immediately recognize his danger. He'll actually shout for cover from his companions, and when they suppress you, he'll move to join them, or more likely to circle and flank you. Stop firing for just a few seconds, and the insanely clever opponents will begin to move in. They'll even recognize the lesser suppressing danger of a bolt action rifle versus the potential lethality of a machine gun spread, and react accordingly. Simply put, the AI of friends and foes alike will dynamically react to the surrounding world, adjusting to new situations, and most importantly, to the player's actions. The resulting environment has the potential to feel far more like an open world playground than the linear path driven designs that have characterized the FPS genre for years.

To compete with the frightening intelligence of this new breed of enemy soldier, another surprising addition to the Medal of Honor formula will help to give gamers an edge up. For the first time, upgradeable weapons will be available, and their dramatic potential for improvement will drive both game progression and a reward system for players. When the idea of alterable guns was first considered, it was almost discounted since it seemed a betrayal of the quest for authenticity that drives the entire project. However, careful research revealed a surprising fact: weapon improvement was a practiced, if not common occurrence, among the Allied soldiers of World War II. By examining the numerous ways that actual fighting troops tinkered with their firearms, the developers are creating an intricate system of upgrade possibilities to allow for player customization. "Every Allied weapon you carry in the game has specific upgrades that can be attached to it to make it much more powerful," Gilmore explains. These can be collected throughout the game in various ways. Nazi soldiers who took gun pieces from their fallen enemies will drop them. An unmarked barrel might hide new options, or the white swath of parachute cloth in a far off tree might mark not only a fallen comrade, but the upgrades he has left behind to aid you. In addition, successful mission completions will earn you even more pieces to flesh out your arsenal. Each of these upgrades will only be available to a soldier who first begins to master that given tool of battle – the more you use a gun, the sooner you'll be able to dip into your inventory of collected parts and apply the refit. Each weapon you've taken the time to "level up" will be available at the start of every mission. However, if you drop it during the fight, other weapons of the same variety that you might find on the ground will be the base model. As for Axis weapons, you can certainly pick them up to use them in a pinch, but keep in mind that the enemy ordnance won't improve with use. Gilmore added: "Each weapon is like a character. And you end up with ten to twelve of those characters in the game that you're constantly invested in improving and refining."


(Concept art)

Gilmore and weapon designer Ryan Heaton helped to illustrate this exact point by showing us a playable demo of the Thompson M-1928A1 machine gun. This close quarters lead hose left the factory as a veritable killing machine. But in the hands of American soldiers, the tommy gun saw dramatic alterations. The popular weapon had the deficiencies of a heavy muzzle rise and a wide spread of fire, both of which are clearly apparent with the base model in-game. However, judicious adjustment can yield all sorts of improvements. Add a trench knife for one hit melee kills, or a quick switch double clip taped together for faster reloads. Alternately, adapt the hardware for a larger overall ammo supply with a drum magazine, or slip on a front pistol grip to aid stability and increase your accuracy. With each upgrade, the team used historical authenticity to guide the process. You won't see an extreme long distance scope on the Thompson. Each new addition improves what the gun is already good at – it never turns it into something it was never meant to be.

Brilliant enemies and role-playing style weapon upgrades aren't the only thing that EALA is seeking to enhance. Beyond basic gameplay shifts, the approach to next-generation tech is equally aggressive. Nowhere is this fact more in evidence than with the facial modeling and animation improvements planned for the title. "We want our human characters to have a higher degree of emotional fidelity than anything we've ever seen in a game," Gilmore tells us. Abandoning conventional approaches to lifelike realism, the team began to pursue what one might consider the next evolution of motion capture – U-Cap. This procedural animation tool was what allowed the next-gen Fight Night demo from E3 2005 to so accurately depict a brutal punch to the face. By taking multiple camera shots of an actor's face, his video image can then be animated and placed in the game to exhibit nearly identical facial muscle movements to the original video. Unwilling to stop there, the MoH character designers and animators have taken yet another leap forward with a process they call E-Cap. Using the U-Cap technology as a baseline, the actor being filmed is asked to show off emotional extremes to the camera, including eye movements and drastic muscle distortions. With this captured video, the new E-Cap technology allows animators to pick one, two, or more of these emotional extremes and combine them, thereby allowing any soldier on the battlefield to

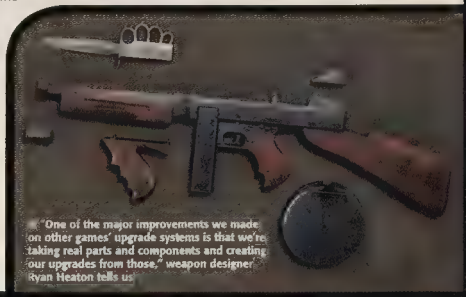
■ In this sequence, we see a friendly soldier fearfully approach as sniper fire threatens from above. Before he can find its origin, the sharpshooter takes him with a bullet to the neck



simultaneously exhibit varying degrees and intensities of virtually any feeling. Unlike with U-Cap, these new animations aren't like replayed movies – instead they are actual emotional responses to the situation at hand. A new recruit beside you might be terrified and excited at the same time. If he sees his best friend gunned down, a touch of anger might enter the mix. As a player, you might watch him rise from his trench to fire back, only to take a bullet to the arm, at which point pain will further crease his unhappy brow. E-Cap allows emotions to dynamically appear in real time, unfolding on a character's face as events occur.

Body movement is receiving a similar degree of attention. Each animation is being crafted to tell the story of the game through the visual cues you see throughout the world. Body tension, style of walking, and the direction that they're facing can often tell volumes about another character in the game. Without any color coding help, the team hopes that players will be able to tell a Nazi march from a fellow Airborne soldier's gait. More than that, their body posture should even communicate to you whether they are taut and cautious of your presence or blindly unaware. "We want the Germans and the Americans to move very differently, so that the player can say, 'I know my enemy. Even from a distance, I know this is a German soldier by the way he moves,'" animator Bruce Ferriz informs us. Even previous combat experience should be visible at a glance. That same raw recruit in the trench might flinch noticeably on your right as a bullet passes nearby. A longtime veteran on your left will simply twitch an eyebrow and aim back down his sight.

These animation improvements are the beginnings of a larger visual design plan that governs how Medal of Honor Airborne will distinguish itself from its predecessors and competitors. Many historically based games put players in a sepia-toned memory of the past. But those who lived through these conflicts remember their experiences in vivid color and gritty detail. "We want to put you in history. We want to put you in World War II. We don't want to put you in a classroom and show you a bunch of archival footage," Gilmore promises. In Airborne, the black and white stock footage of the war has disappeared, replaced by an attempt to recreate World War II as the soldiers saw it. To do this, designers are utilizing the same approach as the animators to create the surrounding world. The story is told in large part from the objects and environments you see onscreen. Light and shadow interplay to establish the mood of an abandoned winery. Bright colors of red and blue adorn Italian doors, and their brilliance serves to guide you towards those entrances. Monochromatic schemes of gray and green have been abolished – each level is unique and vibrant. Choking dust and volatile ambient movement bring a firefight to life. Game scenes we were shown had the tragedy of war readily apparent. In a fallen French building, a doll's head and a shattered rocking horse speak volumes. Like a good movie, the surrounding props immerse you completely in the experience.



"One of the major improvements we made on other games' upgrade systems is that we're taking real parts and components and creating our upgrades from those," weapon designer Ryan Heaton tells us.



E-Cap technology allows for dramatic shifts in the display of emotions, allowing characters to exhibit the full range of human feeling



Subtle curves and aging rock help to eliminate sharp right angles in the environments, making a 1940's Italian town feel natural and genuine



After being treated on the laundry list of technological upgrades, we began to probe Gilmore for tidbits about the rest of the gaming experience. His most surprising response came as we questioned the potential multiplayer features of the title. "Co-op is the primary focus for us right now. There are games like Battlefield that present other forms of multiplayer and do it really well. So instead, just in the spirit of choosing what we do, and doing it really well, our total production emphasis has been on getting co-op to be as outstanding as possible." Cooperative play is not just a convenient add on. This major addition to the game's framework takes full advantage of next-generation online services by offering a promised minimum of two to four-player cooperative gaming at any time. Details are being hammered out as we speak, but it's a sure thing that you'll be able to jump with your buddies. You'll all be in the plane together as you anxiously await the deployment order. Diving one by one from the transport, each of you will be able to target one end of the battlefield and work to the center. Alternately, head for a central rally point and face your foes as a team. As you're pinned down, one friend might fall to the enemy onslaught. Instead of a traditional respawn, he will return to the fray by way of a low flying small scale transport drop, and will parachute down as a reinforcement trooper. Still pinned down? He can drop in behind his killers for a surprise assault. Furthermore, the team is even considering including a feature by which a friend could join the battle at any time. He logs on to his PS3 or Xbox 360, sees on his friends list what you're playing, and he might just hop into the fight. As you're being hammered by enemies too tough to face alone, imagine your best bud parachuting through a hole in the barn roof above you, guns blazing as he drops in to save the day.

We also learned that EALA has some hefty plans for fully controllable vehicles within the game. While this feature is even earlier along than co-op plans, we were assured that the vehicle inclusion was far more than simple rail shooting sequences. These will be conveyances that you move and drive, with the option for passengers and onboard weapons. While the team was hesitant to name specifics, our imaginations turn to gripping tank engagements and bumpy truck escapes almost immediately. Plus, our own historical research revealed that those Allied air drops weren't always just parachute drops – hang gliders were also an important part of the war effort. Of course, whether any of these variations on the vehicle concept appear, we'll all have to wait and see.

Overall, everything we saw on our recent EALA studio visit revealed a drastic overhaul of the Medal of Honor franchise – everything geared towards an ambitious step into the next generation. As it turns out, PS2 and Xbox versions of the game are also in development along with their newer cousins. While it appears that those versions will share the same game name, expect some dramatically different content if you haven't yet upgraded to a new system by release time next winter. The older generation iterations will include the same wartime operations as PS3 and 360, but the mission structure will be completely retooled to best fit the system constraints of the older hardware. You'll have specific landing zones in these versions, and the gameplay seems to have a stronger focus on ground tactics. Even so, a tremendous amount of cooperation between the different game teams assures that even the previous generation systems should have some remarkable features to boast. However, our time was spent exclusively exploring the next generation versions, a terminology that is itself in the process of disappearing. By the time Medal of Honor Airborne releases, we will no doubt be prepared to dub the PS3 and Xbox 360 as the new current gen. As that shift occurs, Medal of Honor Airborne serves as an astonishing assurance that the momentous conflicts of the past hold a remarkable future for gamers.



■ Medal of Honor Airborne [illegible] for what Renderware [illegible]

■ Cooperative play is the primary multiplayer focus. Jumping into battle with three friends promises to be an amazing experience

MORTAL KOMBAT ARMAGEDDON

THE FINAL DROP OF BLOOD

"The theme of finality came up when we were determining whether we should move on to the next generation or create one last game for the current consoles," recalls Mortal Kombat's creator, Ed Boon. "Finality drove the whole story. It drove the feature sets. It's the last step in this generation. By wrapping things up, we can move on to the next generation with the slate wiped clear."

Leaving the current generation with the series in its current state is comparable to turning off *Star Wars* before the Death Star is destroyed, or *The Lord of the Rings* before the One Ring is cast back into the fire. In a way, Mortal Kombat: Armageddon will bring with it an end to an era – the final battle for a generation. When the last drop of blood is spilled, Shang Tsung's deadly tournament will likely reach its conclusion. "I want to see a pan shot over a battlefield that is smoldering and littered with bodies," says Boon. "It's going to be this massive culmination of things. I can't imagine that we'll come back [in the next generation] and not have a Sub-Zero or Scorpion, but my feeling is that I would like to introduce as much newness as is possible."

To ensure that all of the loose ends are properly tied up, every character that has ever thrown a punch in a Mortal Kombat tournament is suiting up for another round in Armageddon. "We really want to play up the nostalgia factor of it," comments Boon. Just looking at the roster of 60-plus combatants will assuredly bring back a flood of memories for fans. Did you ever really think you would see Stryker again?

This immense roster is just a small taste of the new material that will be included in this explosive finale. This installment will also house the reinvention of the Fatality system, the implementation of the series' first create-a-fighter mode, the evolution of combat through aerial maneuvers, plus the transformation of Konquest mode – which could very well double as a stand alone game like Shaolin Monks.

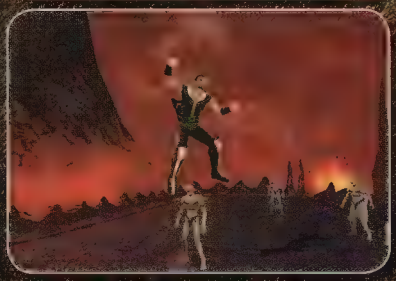
"We can only do this mass amount of content because it's the current generation," injects Boon. "We're not reinventing the display engine." As the future of the series looms ever closer, Armageddon will serve as a bridge between generations, bringing with it a sense of closure for fans, while still leaving the series open for rebirth.

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2 PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY
> **RELEASE** OCTOBER



Bottom: Shang Tsung, Scorpion, Sub-Zero, Shinnok
Row 1: Shujinko, Kai, Kung Lao, Quan Chi, Reiko
Row 2: Kabal, Kano, Cyrax, Sonya, Jarek, Stryker, Rain
Row 3: Ashrah, Sindel, Kitana, Johnny Cage, Liu Kang, Reptile, Baraka, Raiden
Row 4: Kenshi, Li Mei, Dairou, Sareena, Tanya, Darrius, Noob, Smoke
Row 5: Nightwolf, Ermac, Movado, Kobra, Kira, Fujin, Frost, Havik, Jax
Row 6: Bo Rai Cho, Hotaru, Drahmin, Mokap, Mileena, Jade, Sektor, Hsu Hao, Nitara
Row 7: The Dragon King, Kintaro, Shao Kahn, Goro, Sheeva, Moloch
Row 8: Blaze
Not Pictured: Motaro (might not make the cut)







As fans can attest, part of this series' identity was lost when it made the transition to 3D. As the brutality of combat intensified through the years, the strategic elements that players could tap into only constricted. The reasoning for this is simple. Midway eliminated aerial combat – a huge component that lent itself to both offensive and defensive techniques.

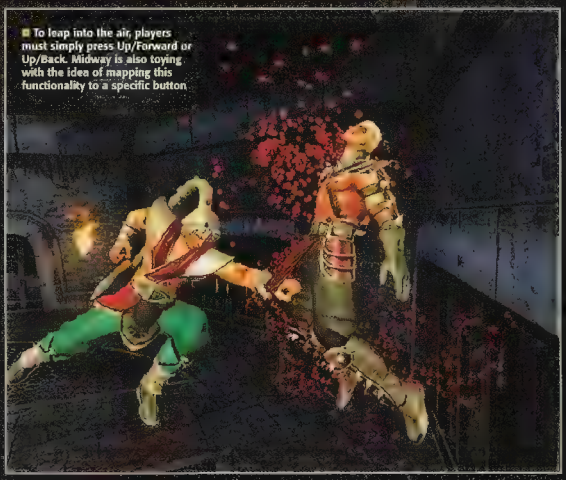
"Most 3D games are usually about dodging and positioning yourself to land attacks. It's all on the ground. Air plays a very small role in 3D games," Boon says. "The whole strategy of jumping over fireballs and ducking beneath blades that we saw in 2D games – we are really trying to add that to the 3D movement." Some Mortal Kombat players based their entire strategies around the jumping mechanic. The team hopes that these players will once again feel at home in Armageddon.

If Johnny Cage uppercuts Ermac, he won't have to wait for his adversary's body to fall into range. He can take to the air and continue the assault. The options that he has are not as limited as you would think, either. The air combat is not just a gimmick that can continue a combo in a flashy way. It is a fully-featured extension to the ground combat. Johnny Cage can throw a few punches or kicks if he deems it necessary. He can also grab onto his attacker and toss him toward the ground with such force that the body is elevated high into the sky again. Boon actually showed us a powerful 15-hit combo that danced between the ground and the sky. The potential that this resurrected element adds to the game certainly favors more violent offensive assaults. Players on the receiving end of an attack are not helpless, however. The series' handy combo breaker can be initiated in the air as well.

Another aspect that is completely being rebuilt is the gruesome Fatality system. "We really saw as we were creating Fatalities that the characters were just going through the motions and the players just sat back and watched," Boon comments. "In the first game, you basically had to do a combination, hit a button, see a show. As we moved on, we decided, 'Okay, now we'll have two Fatalities per character.' And then we started stretching out the length of them – like a fighter tearing out an opponent's heart and shoving it back in his face. And then we started making Fatalities that were like plays – Sub-Zero freezes his opponent's feet, sweeps his legs, then when the guy is crawling away, steps on his head and it explodes. The obvious question became: What if you had control over every single step in a Fatality?"

At the end of the match, when your opponent blinks in and out of consciousness and the booming voice tells you to "finish him," you will now be taking this barbaric task into

CONTINUED ON PAGE 56 >>



To leap into the air, players must simply press Up/Forward or Up/Back. Midway is also toying with the idea of mapping this functionality to a specific button.



Taking advantage of a new control mechanic, team combat mode is no longer solely about one-on-one battles. Much like Shaolin Monks, you'll often find yourself juggling a handful of enemies at once.



The character that players control in Konquest mode is new to the series, but has yet to be given an official name. For now, Boon simply calls him Bob

The character selection screen is so pressed for space that it actually has to rotate over to reveal the remainder of characters

Fighting in the air isn't limited to one quick little attack. It's almost like the players are floating as they string together huge aerial combos

Even if you don't have someone lined up for a deathtrap, the new directional throwing function will allow you to hit your mark

Building a Fighter

Character creation is a time-consuming endeavor, but it's also a satisfying one that allows players to fingerprint their games. The Kreate-a-Fighter option in Armageddon gives players freedom to personalize every aspect. When you enter this mode, you'll be confronted by a handful of options: Appearance, Fighting Style, Weapon Style, Extra, and Biography.



Some people choose to make their fighters bear a resemblance to themselves, other people try to make the strangest character possible, while others yet try to create new characters that fit into the universe of the given game. Armageddon's extensive lists of clothing and accessories will allow just this. You can even tweak the facial features of the character model, as well as one additional area on the female model.



The Mortal Kombat series has always been big on changing the color of its ninjas. You'll have this option as well. If there's a color on a garment, you'll be able to change it.



Of course, bling bling is a necessity for fights to the death.



When you finalize your character's look, you'll need to pick the weapons of choice and three fighting styles that he or she will use.



Then, just like a wrestling game, you'll need to assign each individual move that you will use in the game.

your very own hands. "What if you had 20 different moves that your character could do right off the bat?" Boon asks enthusiastically. "One of them could be cutting off his head, another could be ripping off an arm, one of them could be stabbing them in the chest. You'll have this sequence where you have time to finish them." With each painful injury that you exact on your helpless foe, the time that is allotted for the next move is shortened. As you keep going, and the blood keeps flying, continuing the Fatality will progressively grow more difficult. Of course, every character in the game will be equipped with exclusive Fatality moves, but the exact number has yet to be determined. "We have to see how much we can squeeze into memory," Boon says with a smile. "We really want to see what kind of custom [Fatalities] people can create in the allotted time. There will definitely be people who are memorizing and practicing the sequences."

With every aspect of the game now demanding skill, the stakes for head-to-head competitions have elevated. Mastering a specific character is a commendable feat, but one that doesn't really bring out the player's personality. This is all about to change. For the first time in a Mortal Kombat game, players can now create their own combatant. The level of customization that is offered is comparable in depth and variety to THQ's stable of wrestling games. While you could easily vest numerous hours altering the appearance of your character, you will likely spend more time compiling his or her arsenal of attacks. "You actually select every attack for a fighter," Boon comments. "You'll even have the chance to name your fighting styles."

Unless someone is playing as a preset character, you never really know what to expect from an online bout. The time that you invest in creating your character won't fall onto blind eyes. There are few gaming accomplishments that bring with it the level of gratification that creating characters and relying on your skills to carry them to the top of the ranks will. This will definitely be an area where hardcore gamers congregate and battle for pride.

Casual gamers who don't want to vest time building a fighter will find just as much depth in the drastically overhauled Konquest mode. "The visuals that you see in this mode are some of the best graphics that our team has ever created," adds Boon. The dimly lit caverns and murky skies definitely bring out the dark nature that has accompanied every MK title, but the one thing that really caught our eye was how closely this mode now resembles the recently released spin-off Shaolin Monks. With enemies crawling out of the woodwork from every direction, this mode has taken on the identity of a brawler and even features its own fighting mechanic. A swift kick can knock someone into a spike wall deathtrap, an uppercut can send someone into a fan or onto an ice spike. Pick up an enemy and throw them in the direction of another adversary and you'll knock them down – and perhaps part of the environment as well. Players can even look forward to a unique story, boss fights, and tons of new characters and creatures (that unfortunately won't cross over into the main game).

This time around, you won't be forced into playing each mode to unlock all of the content in the game. If you like one specific game mode, you can stick with it and unlock the bonus content that lines the newly designed vault (replacing the Krypt). Puzzle Kombat and chess are not making a return in this installment, but these fun little diversions are being replaced by something new. Something strange. Something that will support up to eight players simultaneously online.

In waving goodbye to an era, Boon and his team have opened up a world of possibilities for players – be it long forgotten gameplay strategies or a bold new approach to head-to-head contests. Armageddon is poised to rock the PlayStation 2 and Xbox to their very foundations come this October.





All of the characters from Mortal Kombat's fighting history are in the game and playable





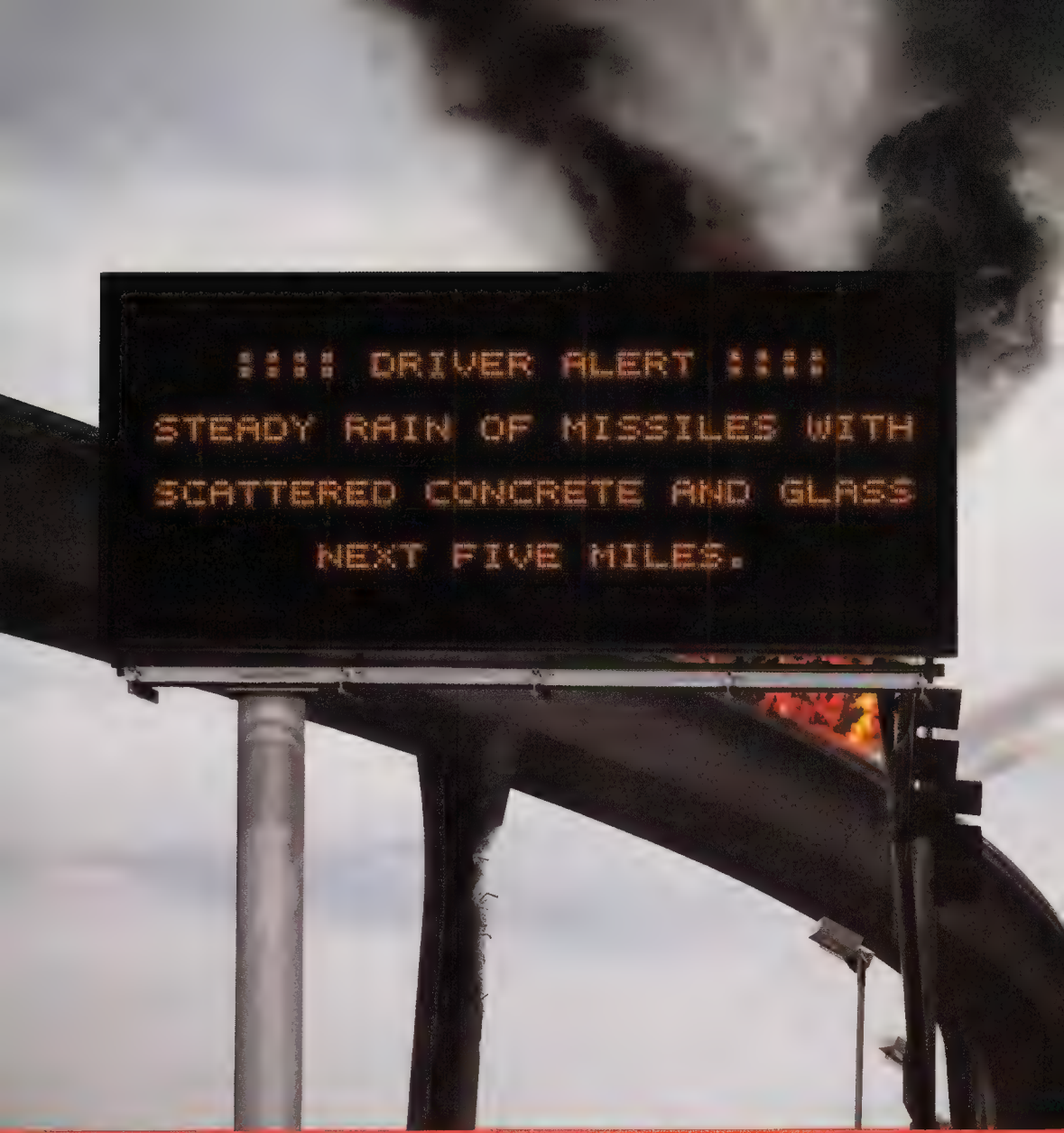
This is just a guess on our part, but we have a feeling that Stryker will probably die at the end of this tournament



Tons of new enemy types are being added to Konquest mode



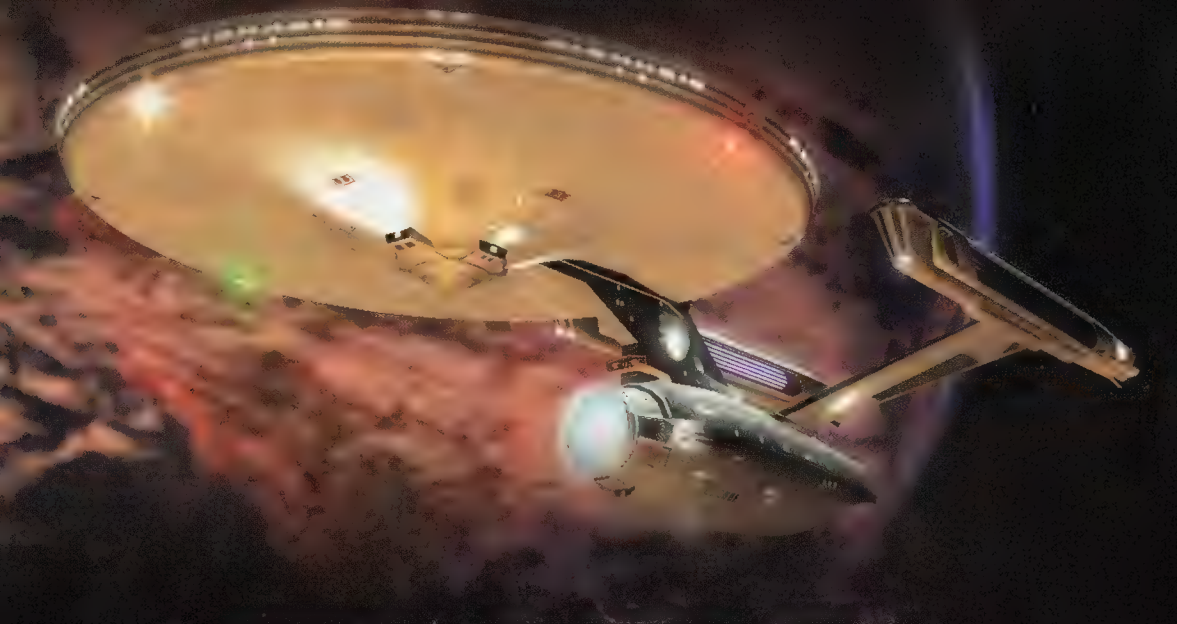
Not putting a lot of work in your created character can lead to pleasing results



TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence
SEGA
ONLY ON XBOX 360
360 LIVE



HORSEPOWER MEETS FIREPOWER



STAR TREK LEGACY

A NEW FRONTIER

In 1966 the world was introduced to Captain James T. Kirk and his crew aboard the starship Enterprise. In the 40 years that have followed, the Star Trek franchise has boldly gone where none have gone before, surfacing as a multimedia juggernaut spanning (in part) multiple TV series, novels, movies, tabletop role-playing, and video games. Some of these pages in Star Trek history are revered as classics, and others loathed as heresy. In the digital realm, Star Trek video games can only be described as inconsistent. Ranging from strategic simulations to space dogfighters, the only common thread tying together the titles that have been well-received by fans and critics is faithfulness to the spirit of the subject matter. At its core, Star Trek is about the characters, the ships, and how they come together in battle. In the past, games have focused on this dynamic in specific sections of the series' timeline, but no one has yet produced the single, definitive game that ties the continuity together. After all, bringing together the captains, villains, and starships of every era sounds like an impossible task. Regardless, with Star Trek: Legacy, Mad Doc Software is about to make it so.

XBOX 360 | PC

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PC INTERNET) > **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA GAME STUDIOS > **DEVELOPER** MAD DOC SOFTWARE > **RELEASE** SEPTEMBER



Bringing together action and strategy in 3D space, Legacy aims to be the thinking man's Star Trek game

Star Trek, to say the least, is a series with a large and passionate following. Though some would dismiss a comprehensive knowledge of this franchise as geekdom of the highest order, many people don't realize how deeply Star Trek has worked its way into our culture since its debut. NASA's first space shuttle, Enterprise, was named after the iconic starship. Internet flame wars were practically born in the primordial soup of early message board debates of Kirk versus Picard. Anyone plugged in to pop culture has a passing familiarity with the series, but it goes far beyond that for others. As a sci-fi subculture, Trekkies (or Trekkers, if that's your preference) serve as the template for devoted fandom, and are notoriously difficult to please. The team at Mad Doc Software is well aware of this, since many members are certifiable Star Trek fanatics themselves. We see evidence of this as we sit down to talk to Legacy's creative director Ian Davis as he actually removes his sweater to reveal a yellow polyester uniform, complete with Enterprise insignia. Make no mistake: Mad Doc takes its Trek seriously. Ian and his team were responsible for the successful Star Trek: Armada II title, but with Legacy they will take the franchise beyond the restrictions of the RTS format. "We've always wanted to do a Star Trek game that captures the core Star Trek fantasy," explains Ian. "When you look at the history of Star Trek games, there have been some good games, but we felt we haven't had the chance to make the game the Star Trek fans want until now."

In its surveys and meetings with these fans, Mad Doc realized that the way to create the ultimate Star Trek game is to focus on the most powerful and suspenseful events in the series' history: the ship-to-ship battles. "When you think back to all the shows and movies, they're about the characters and how they evolve over time, but the best moments are always when the ships are fighting. That last season of *Deep Space Nine* is like pure sex in space," laughs Ian, though he is quick to add: "But I may have some twisted views on things."

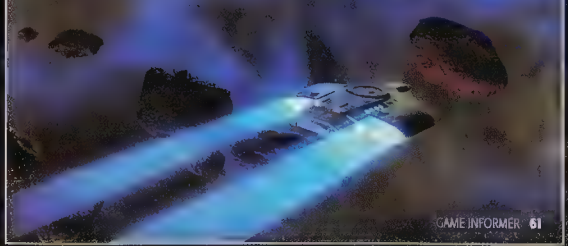
> "We've always wanted to do a Star Trek game that captures the core Star Trek fantasy..."

It may be easy to find a TV show that has a bunch of ships shooting at each other in space, but there is something distinct and inimitable about the way these confrontations play out in Star Trek. Whether it's sneaking under an opponent who only thinks in two dimensions or tracking the ion exhaust of a cloaked Bird of Prey, deft maneuvering and tactical advantages take center stage in these cosmic clashes -- and the team is aiming to capture every facet of this strategy in Legacy through battles that take you through Star Trek's history, from *Enterprise* to *Voyager* and beyond.

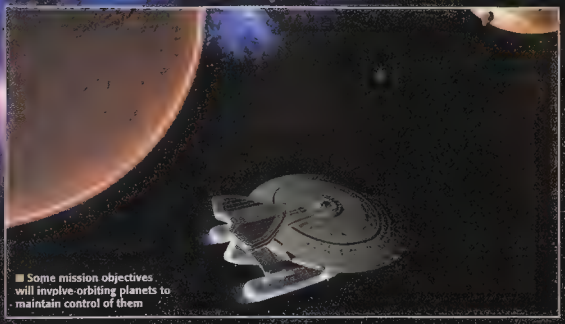
Of course, in order to be an admiral, you need a fleet to command. The single-player campaign puts players in charge of the Federation ships beginning with the NX-01, and as you win engagements



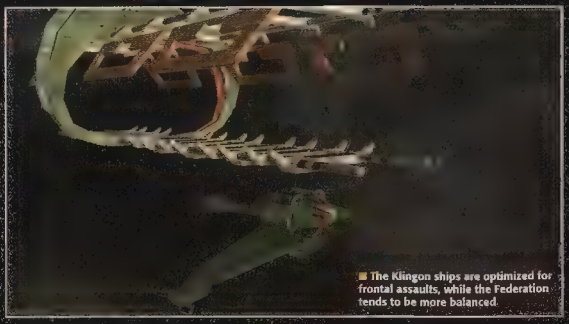
Starbases provide a place for you to repair and re-crew in the midst of battle



The Federation doesn't have access to cloaking technology, so even a few ships like the Defiant



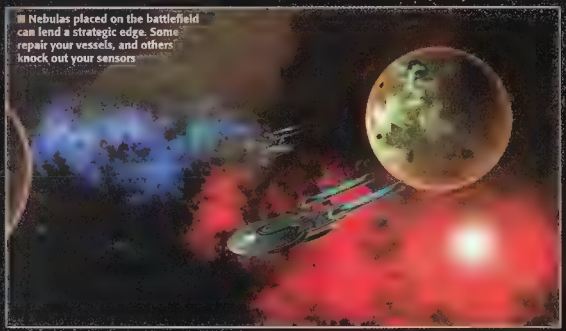
Some mission objectives will involve orbiting planets to maintain control of them



The Klingon ships are optimized for frontal assaults, while the Federation tends to be more balanced

you'll move on to new classes and vessels, jump eras, and witness first-hand the evolution of the Federation Starfleet. In fact, you may even play a direct role in that evolution.

At the beginning, as players become familiar with the controls and strategies, they will only have a few ships to command. As the encounters start to ramp up in difficulty, more will be added to the ranks – but not many more. At the height of the action, players will have control of about four units (a unit can consist of a large capital ship and a smaller, accompanying ship or two). The rate at which your armada expands is largely under your control; emerging victorious from confrontations earns you Command Points that can be spent in two ways to prepare for the upcoming battles. One way is to expend these points purchasing new units, like when you acquire that hot new Constitution class starship to replace your barely warp-capable spaceboat. As the eras pass, the Federation continues to develop better technology, giving you the option of adding a sleek new ship to replace a battle-worn one. Still, being on the cutting edge of technology isn't always the best strategy, no matter how tempting that Galaxy class craft may be.



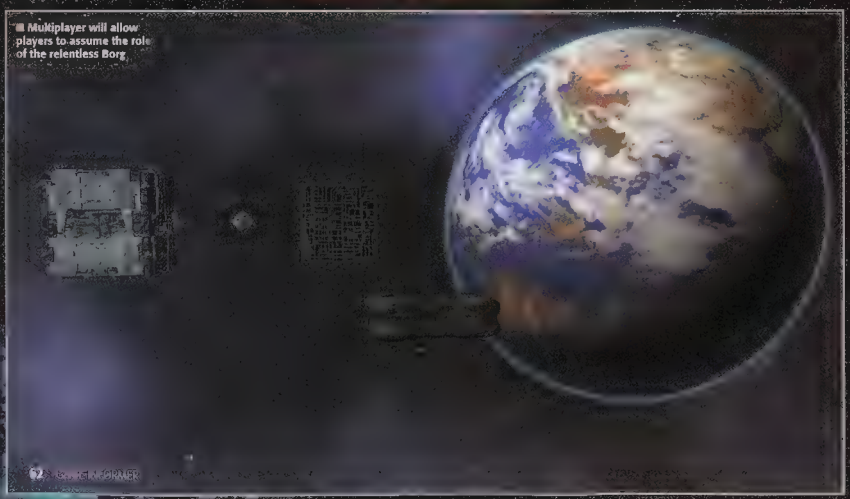
Nebulas placed on the battlefield can lend a strategic edge. Some repair your vessels, and others knock out your sensors

Command Points can also be used to purchase upgrades (increased photon torpedo capacity, better shields) for your existing vessels. In many cases, a fully-upgraded older model will be more effective than a new one fresh off the assembly line. In fact, when the time comes and change is unavoidable, you still may find yourself hesitant. "You'll get attached to these ships," Ian insists. "You won't want to give up your Constitution class when you get to the next generation era, but there was a time when even Kirk had to do it."

Part of this attachment will come from the fact that you will be able to view a comprehensive history of every ship in your fleet as the years pass: when it was commissioned, number and variety of opponents it has destroyed, and upgrades it has undergone and when. "We treat the ships as your characters," Ian tells us. "When a ship dies, that's a big thing in Star Trek. It only happens a few times in the whole 700-plus hours of the whole Star Trek canon where you see the Enterprise get destroyed. It's a big thing, and it should mean something." As exciting as these explosive moments are in Star Trek history, players are going to want to do everything possible to keep the ships intact throughout the campaign, and that means sound tactics and intelligent management of the resources at your disposal.

In the past, there have been space combat games that were just basic starfighters (or rip-offs of X-Wing) with the Star Trek license slapped on. This notion of fast-paced, blistering combat is remarkably unfaithful to what actually makes the Star Trek brand of naval combat enthralling. Legacy will take a much more deliberate, position-based approach closer to choreography than joystick-jockeying. "The differences between this game and a regular starship flight sim are similar to those between a tactical shooter and a first-person shooter," elaborates Ian. "You have all these characters that can be equipped differently and used for different purposes. There's action, but it's not like 'I'm a fighter pilot' action. It's 'I command a starfleet' action: It takes place on your orders."

The levels at which you execute your orders can vary depending on your play style and situation. For a more hands-on approach, you can manually dictate the precise angle at which you assault a Borg Tactical Cube, or sit back in the captain's chair as you issue a general attack order on the Romulan fleet, letting the AI handle the rest. Some gamers may have reservations about trusting their fleet to a computer, but it helps to think that you are actually leaving it in the hands of experienced officers. If you decide to switch control from the Enterprise-D to a different unit, the fate of the crew isn't in the hands of a generic AI; the ship will be controlled according to Captain Picard's general style of combat, up to and including the impressive Picard Maneuver. Of course, these techniques will be available to the player as well when using direct control, and not only for Jean-Luc; all of the key captains will have access to their trademark moves in order to gain a strategic advantage. Legacy's producer Parker Davis explains more: "There will be straightforward maneuvers like lining up the aft torpedoes, but there are also more elaborate ones – like where Picard yells out some-



Multiplayer will allow players to assume the role of the relentless Borg

thing like 'Alpha Tango Gamma Gamma' and then the ship does some loops and barrel rolls, then flanks the enemy."

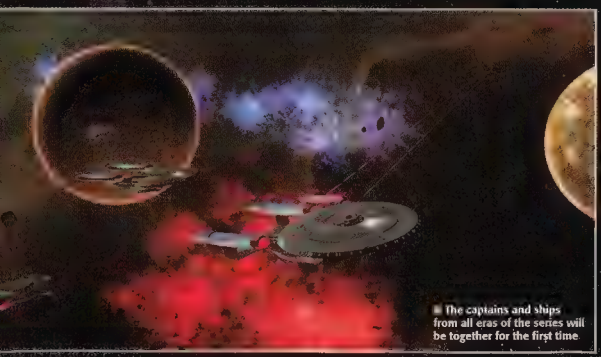
Almost as satisfying as outwitting your foes with these tricks is witnessing the devastation that can result from them. If you fire a photon torpedo into an unprotected hull, the aftermath involves more than a little explosion and a life-bar decrease.

"We're going to have a lot of variety in the types of damage and the techniques and effects we're going to use to simulate the weakening of the ships," Parker describes. "You'll have different damage mapping, like normal maps that suggest giant craters and holes in the ships. It's going to look amazing." Then Ian chimes in: "We've actually had people walk by our screens in the office thinking that we had DVDs of the movies in there. But I was just watching *Star Trek II* yesterday, and I realized that we look way better," he laughs. "We'd have to lower our quality if we want to hit that mark."

As the screenshots on these pages illustrate, the models for the ships are certainly on the same level as anything seen in the series so far. Though the vessels are the primary focus of Legacy, the circumstances that bring all the magnificent ships together is not to be pushed by the wayside; the storyline is compelling enough to pass for an even-numbered film in the series. As the very first form of media to bring all of the generations together in the same place, the team faced the challenge of devising a story that spans the entire continuity while tying the time periods together. The campaign is split into three distinct eras: Enterprise, The Original Series, and Next Generation-plus. In each of these phases, you will confront familiar foes from the series (Romulans for Enterprise, Klingons for ToS, the Borg for Next Gen), but there will be an overarching mystery connecting the events of each stemming from an episode of Next Generation entitled "Contagion."

An ancient species known as the Iconians once possessed a unique technology that allowed for instant teleportation in space, and though Picard learns of this eventually, it was actually uncovered in an earlier era by an obsessive Vulcan archae-

(Continued on page 65)

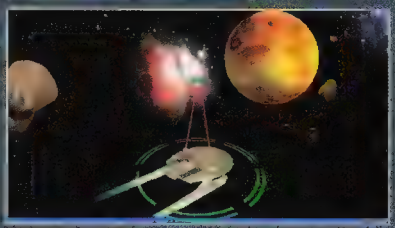


■ The captains and ships from all eras of the series will be together for the first time.

THE TINY FRONTIER



Star Trek: Legacy isn't the only game coming out in 2006 to honor the franchise's 40-year history. Quicksilver Software, the developer of 1999's acclaimed Starfleet Command, is working on a companion title for the PSP and DS to be released at about the same time as the console game. Entitled Star Trek: Tactical Assault, this handheld adventure will have a smaller scope than Legacy, taking place entirely in the era of the original series. Even so, it shares Legacy's focus on deliberately-paced, strategic action as players work their way through two separate campaigns focusing on the Federation and the Klingon struggles. Even more races become available through wireless head-to-head multiplayer, which adds Romulan, Orion, and Gorn ships into the mix. As the battles play out on a 2D plane, players will have to make choices as a captain, like whether to attack an unresponsive vessel or mediate a local dispute. The most compelling feature, however, is exclusive to the DS. The unit's touch screen can be used as a command console. Using the stylus, you can control the action entirely from the lower screen, pushing buttons and moving sliders to perform functions like redirecting power to shields and firing photon torpedoes.





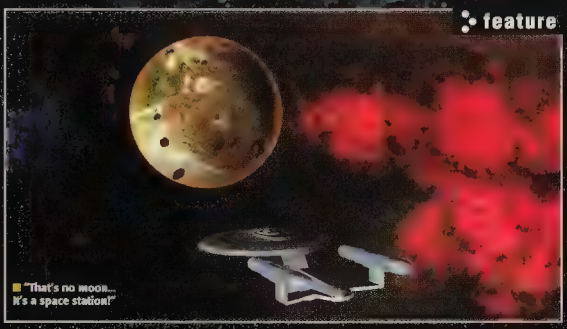
■ Technology advances for all races as the years pass, not just for the Federation



■ Coordinating your efforts is the only way to win battles; Running and gunning won't cut it



Your fleet will be fairly small, so you'll need to use your units wisely



"That's no moon... It's a space station!"

ologist named Sovak. Intent on creating a logical utopia, Sovak vows to use the power to bring order to the universe, making shady alliances and bargains with the prominent species to achieve his goal. These dealings happen largely in the background during the game's first two campaigns, but Sovak's machinations become a much greater concern when he makes an unfortunate partnership with the greatest threat ever faced by the Federation: the Borg.

Eventually, you discover that the worst of all possible scenarios is about to come true: There is a technology with the potential to tip the balance of power, there is a crazed Vulcan who will stop at nothing to get it, and then there's the Borg – a race whose dominance is centered solely on absorbing technology. With all of civilization on the brink of assimilation, the last battle spans time and quadrants, resulting in you having all the ships and captains working together to shut down this Iconian-Borg abomination.

> "A lot of the appeal for the Star Trek fan is going to be the fact that you're getting it all..."

With all of the captains on the same battlefield interacting, one must wonder whether the actors who portrayed them will be lending their likenesses and voices to the game. Unfortunately, this is a question that cannot be answered at this early phase, though Ian did assure that it is a priority for the team. "The goal is to have Picard narrate the events. We're working on that right now. Of course, we want everyone in the game. But we have to see how schedules work out."

As exciting as it would be to have full control of Scott Bakula as Captain Archer, the NX-01 and its successors won't be the only available craft to control. While single-player focuses solely on the Federation, multiplayer will enable you to command the Romulan, Klingon, and Borg war machines as well. The full details of each race aren't available yet, suffice it to say that these fleets will be just as comprehensive as the Federation's, and will give the players opportunities to develop new tactics based on the strengths and weaknesses of each race.

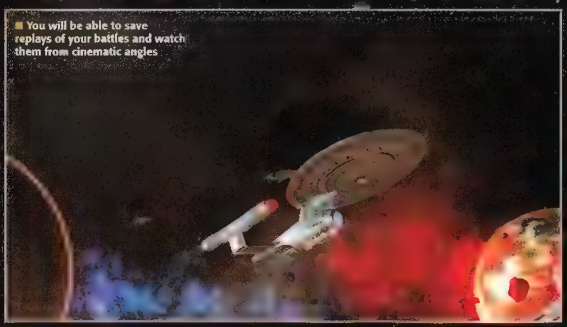
"A lot of the appeal for the Star Trek fan is going to be the fact that you're getting it all," points out Ian. "Legacy ties all of the races and eras together. Starfleet is something that people have seen at different times, and the timeline jumps around. Here, you see it from the beginning, you see the styles evolve, you see the different characters, you see how the Romulans tie into the Klingons and the Borg. It all fits together in this coherent whole."

It is this unified vision of the mythology that promises to set Star Trek: Legacy apart from its predecessors. It isn't a space warfare game with a license tacked on; from day one, it has been conceived as the definitive Star Trek title. The fusion of the action and strategy genres creates a battle mechanic that captures the essence of Star Trek sure to please the most seasoned Starfleet admiral, but provides an experience that even a novice cadet could enjoy. Whether you're a captain or a red-shirt, Legacy will change your perception of Star Trek video games as the series takes this long-awaited step further into the final frontier. ■■■

STAR TREK TIMELINE

Without a solid knowledge of Star Trek lore, it can be tough keeping track of the different characters and their eras. The latest series is actually the first chronologically, there are several different ships called "The Enterprise," and while one thing is happening on Voyager, something else is going on in Deep Space Nine. Since you'll be dealing with all of these elements in Star Trek: Legacy, here's a brief guide to help sort out who is the captain of which ship, and where in the the events of the Star Trek continuity their exploits take place. For you nitpickers, this only covers the TV series, so keep your Enterprise-E comments to yourself.

Enterprise	The Original Series	The Next Generation	Deep Space Nine	Voyager
Spans Years: 2151-2155 **Captain:** Jonathan Archer **Ship:** USS Enterprise NX-01	**Spans Years:** 2267-2269 **Captain:** James T. Kirk **Ship:** USS Enterprise NCC-1701	**Spans Years:** 2364-2370 **Captain:** Jean-Luc Picard **Ship:** USS Enterprise NCC-1701-D	**Spans Years:** 2369-2375 **Captain:** Benjamin Sisko **Ship:** Space Station Deep Space Nine, USS Defiant NX-74205	**Spans Years:** 2371-2377 **Captain:** Kathryn Janeway **Ship:** USS Voyager NCC-74656



You will be able to save replays of your battles and watch them from cinematic angles



If there's one thing Star Trek's warring species can agree on, it's that *Babylon 5* sucks

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL 2K6



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX | GAMECUBE | PSP
> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE, XBOX LIVE, PSP AD HOC, OR PSP INFRASTRUCTURE)
> **PUBLISHER** 2K SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** KUSH GAMES
> **RELEASE** MARCH

BASEBALL FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

Similar to how video games are catalogued by generations of technology, baseball is chronicled by the generations of its players. The different eras that have swept across the diamond usually share a symbiotic relationship with American history. Following World War I, Babe Ruth became the poster boy for the Lost Generation of baseball – a generation of adults that dealt with the large number of deaths suffered in the war. Ted Williams, who fought in World War II, became baseball's face for the Greatest Generation. Mickey Mantle and Hank Aaron were a part of the Silent Generation, coined in the November 5, 1951 issue of *Time* for the people who grew up during the war and depression. Just last year, another chapter in baseball's history was defined, this one forever tarnishing the sport. Jose Canseco and the sluggers of the last three decades have been plastered with the disgraceful name the Juiced Generation.

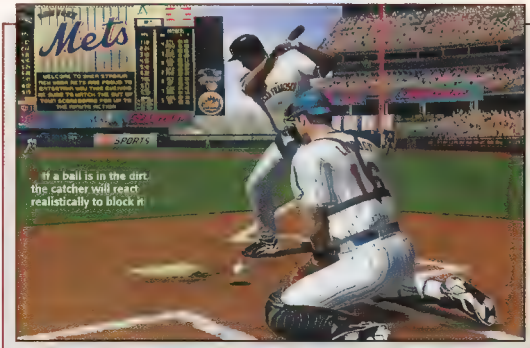
As baseball moves forward into a new generation, so do video games. Waving goodbye to another five years of gaming, 2K Sports believes that this year's iteration of its Major League Baseball series will be the last to grace the current-gen machines. As the finishing touches are being applied to this release, the company is also looking toward the future through a highly modified port on Xbox 360. People in the crowd have AI? Stadiums are detailed right down to the very texture of a seat? The future of this sport will explore avenues that you never thought possible.

While the few gamers out there that actually have the next generation up and running in their living rooms will be treated to a number of enhancements, 2K Sports is confident that the current-gen games will stack up quite favorably with what is delivered on and off the field. You might be relying on your catcher's signs to strike out Albert Pujols in the bottom of the ninth on PlayStation 2. You may lose Derek Jeter to a knee injury after he collides with teammate Alex Rodriguez on a lazy fly ball on GameCube. Or you may find sweat trickling down your brow as you stare Randy Johnson directly in his eerily realistic eyes on the Xbox 360. No matter which system you game on, Major League Baseball 2K6 will deliver the same excitement across all of the machines it graces. Come this March, Major League Baseball 2K6 will usher in a new era of video game baseball.

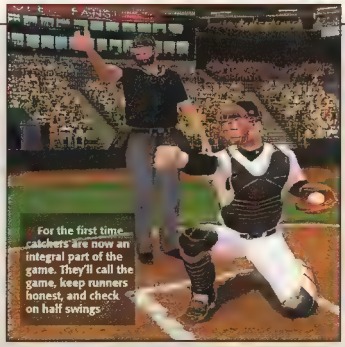
ERA OF CHANGE

★★★★★★★★★★★★

It's always surprising to see how much change can be applied to a game within one year of development. In this short amount of time, Kush Games has torn this game apart and tweaked it to the point that it's hardly recognizable anymore. It would seem that Kush approaches development with the carelessness of a kid who labors for hours on a clay sculpture, only to smash it under his fist within two seconds of it being completed. Obviously, this company knows what it is doing, and the changes that have been made to this year's game are definitely in the right direction not only for this series, but video game baseball as a whole. Everything from the way you move in the field to the functionality of taking a swing explores daring new concepts.



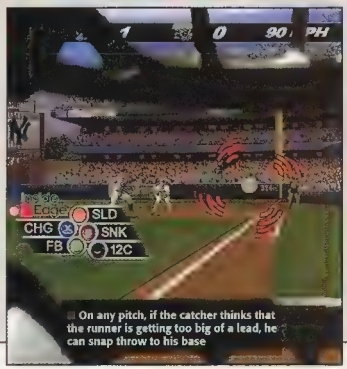
If a ball is in the dirt, the catcher will react realistically to block it


For the first time, catchers are now an integral part of the game. They'll call the game, keep runners honest, and check on half swings

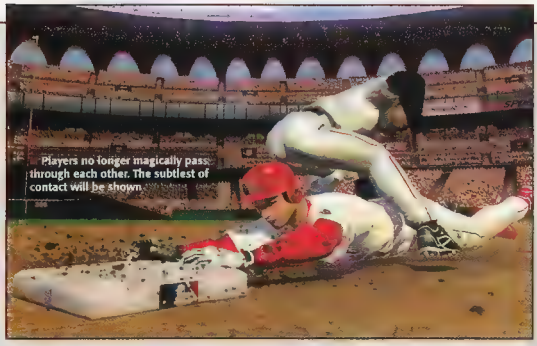
THE MOST UNDERRATED POSITION

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Catchers may be looking like goalies these days (enough with the spray-painted helmets already), but they can do so much more than block balls in the dirt. They are responsible for calling the entire game for the pitcher. Sadly, when a pitcher throws a shutout, you only hear about the pitcher. Kush is hoping that this year's game will change people's perceptions of this position. Before you make your pitch, your catcher will show you what he feels is the proper pitch location as he moves his glove and body into position. He will also flash you a sign for a pitch. Kush handles this by highlighting one of your pitch types. Striving for the highest level of realism possible, each catcher will call a different game, as detailed by their real life statistics for this category. Elevating the sacred catcher pedestal even higher, catchers are also charged with the duty of keeping a watchful eye on base runners. If a player has too big of a lead, you will now have the ability to perform a snap throw back to the base to try and pick them off. When the pitcher delivers the ball, simply hold down the button for the desired base, and the game will transition to the catcher's point of view – featuring the mask and all. When this happens, you'll then be asked to place where you want the throw to go – down for a quick tag or perhaps to the side to get an outstretched hand.



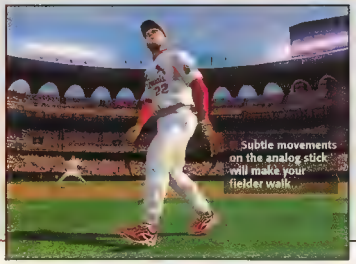
On any pitch, if the catcher thinks that the runner is getting too big of a lead, he can snap throw to his base

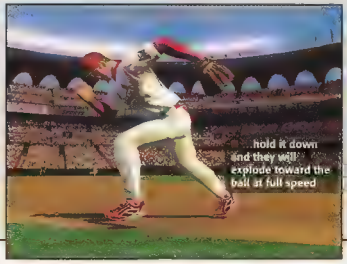

Players no longer magically pass through each other. The subtlest of contact will be shown

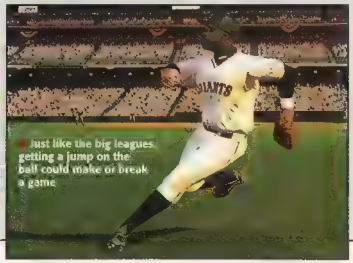
JOGGING AND EXPLODING IN THE OUTFIELD

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Last year, if you so much as sneezed on your analog stick, your player would move in a direction at full speed. There was no gradual acceleration. In this year's game, player movement is momentum based. Tap in a direction and you'll make them walk. Press the stick a little harder and they will jog. Apply full force and they will eventually reach their top speed. If, let's say, two players reach full gallop with both of their heads focused solely on the ball, there is a chance that they will collide in the field. Every person that steps onto the field can be bumped into, knocked over, or worse yet, injured. By adding this element, hard slides on double plays now have new meaning. Overthrown balls to first could also lead to a scary moment. In addition to these two huge changes, Kush is also implementing pressure-sensitive throwing. If a runner is tagging up at third and your left fielder catches the ball shallow, you'll want to press the button as hard as you can to one-hop the ball to the plate. Of course, this will very likely be followed up by a bone-crunching hit.


Subtle movements on the analog stick will make your fielder walk


...hold it down and they will explode toward the ball at full speed



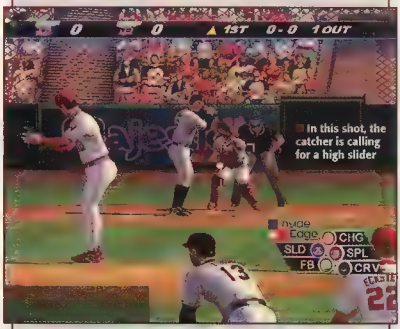
Just like the big leagues, getting a jump on the ball could make or break a game

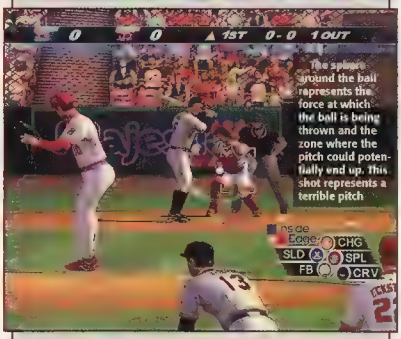
(Current-generation screens shown unless otherwise noted)

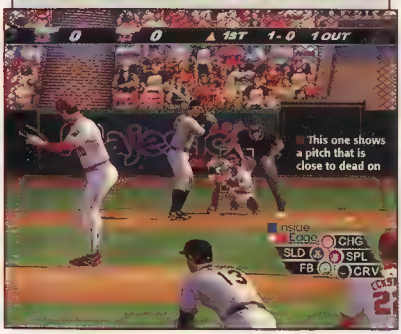
CAN'T HIT THE BROAD SIDE OF A BARN

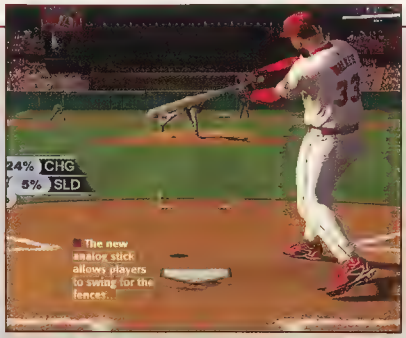
★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

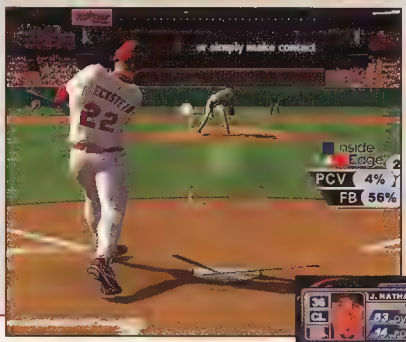
In last year's installment, pitch precision was godlike. You could paint the corners all day long if your timing was on. Kush has recognized that this aspect of the game was way too easy. So, in this year's title, pitching is now far more difficult. It has also been completely reinvented. When you deliver your pitch, if you press and hold the button, a sphere will expand in the strike zone, which designates where the pitch could potentially end up. The harder you press, the larger the zone. When you release the button, the zone will rapidly shrink. If you can press the button again at the exact moment when the zone touches the ball's desired location, you'll likely throw it there. If your timing is off however, the ball will end up somewhere else.







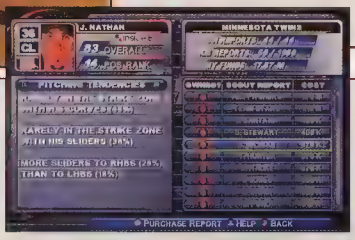




BIG CUTS, LITTLE CUTS, REAL CUTS

★★★★★★★★★★★★★

In a strange twist, both Electronic Arts and Kush Games decided to implement analog swings into their respective games this year. Electronic Arts focuses more on the timing of the swing, whereas Kush is capturing the different cuts that players can make. Hence, you'll swing differently for contact and power hitters. You'll also approach the swing in a different way if you want to pull or push the ball. All of these actions are tied to the right analog stick. Tilt this stick back and let go when the pitch arrives to make contact. Tilt it back and push it forward in a fluid motion for a big power swing. If you pull the stick back to the left or right, your batter will try to place his hit. Simply tilt the stick forward to bunt. Applying another layer to the mix, if you want to cut off the inside corner, you can move around in the batter's box. Additionally, you will now have the option to pick which side of the plate your switch hitters bat from.

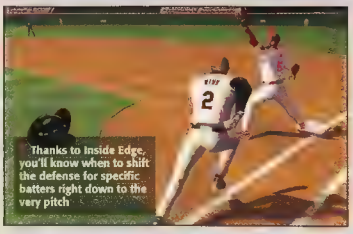


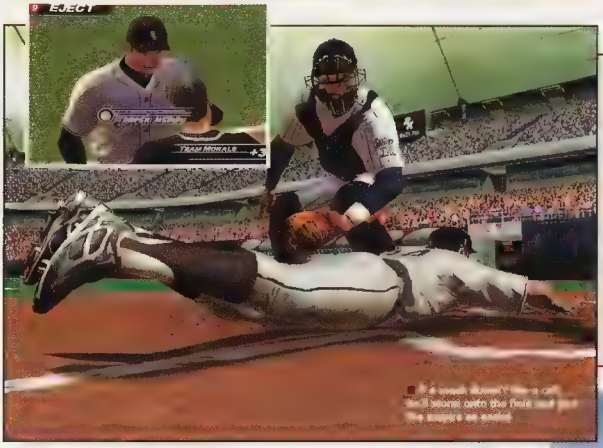


EVERY PITCH AND SWING MATTER

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

Baseball fans may not want to read this, as it is kind of like learning what the Matrix really is, but each year around eight baseball clubs contract a company named Inside Edge to provide scouting information for them. The scouts at Inside Edge track every little statistic possible. So for a pitcher, this includes the most minute of details like the percentage that he throws a fastball on the first pitch in an at bat; the speed of a big, slow 12/6 curveball; the amount of times that he throws a slider to a right-handed batter; and even the batting average of the the players he faces for each of his pitch types. Inside Edge has captured each player in baseball in simple, little numbers. So what happens when Inside Edge teams up with 2K Sports? Each player in the game acts just like he does in real life. If Roy Oswalt throws fastballs 66 percent, curveballs 19 percent, sliders nine percent, and changeups five percent of the time on a first pitch in real life, he'll now do it in the game as well. In the Franchise mode, Inside Edge provides fascinating statistical breakdowns for your team free of charge, but you'll have to spend your club's cash to get the skinny on other players, or if you have a lot of dough lying around, for an entire opposing team. Amazingly, the data that Inside Edge has collected covers three full years of stats for each player.





STUFF IT, SUCKER! GOOD JOB, FELLA!

Managers have rarely been a blip in this series, but this year you'll be seeing more of them than you may like. A close play at first may have Dusty Baker running off of the bench and yelling at the umpire. Through a meter, you will be able to control your manager's anger. Go over the line and he will get tossed from the game. This will result in your player ratings taking a dive for that game, but your manager's passion will give you a boost in morale. After the game, managers (you) can send emails to players – and yes, you can chew them out and bench them if you like. The flipside to this is that your interaction will affect players differently. Each player in the game features a rating for Player Role, MLB Level, Contact, Play Time, Productivity, Manager, Team Streak, Team Standing, Team Chemistry, and Overall. You'll need to keep an eye on them all, as they will loudly voice themselves, letting you know when and why they are unhappy.

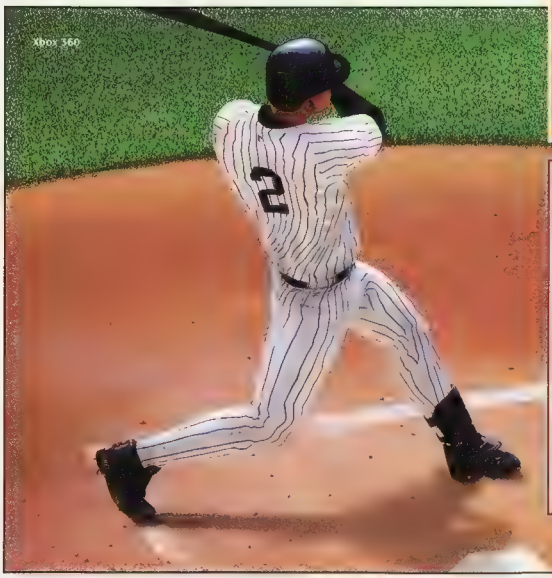
FINALLY VIP

Similar to the Inside Edge, the VIP profiling system tracks users' statistics, showing how you handle different pitches, where you spray the ball, how frequently you use the bullpen and pinch runners, and it will even keep track of your swing timing. Of course, online opponents can view your data to see how they should approach you in the game.

THE REAL WORLD SERIES

Beginning on March 3 and running through March 20, a new type of world series will be held: the World Baseball Classic. Players from the MLB and others from across the world will be representing their countries in this amazing baseball event held in several stadiums around the globe. Ichiro Suzuki will play for Japan, Roger Clemens for the United States, Albert Pujols and David Ortiz for the Dominican Republic, Mike Piazza for Italy, and Andruw Jones will represent the Netherlands. All of the official rosters and jerseys will be included in 2K Sports' recreation of this tournament.





JUST A TASTE OF 360

The Xbox 360 version won't ship simultaneously with the current-generation versions, but 2K Sports believes that it will be trailing only a few weeks behind, placing it in late March or early April. Like 2K Sports' first next-gen basketball foray, the majority of the additions to this version are of the graphical sort. The entire crowd (which can stretch up to 60,000 people) will be fully modeled. If a foul ball is hit to a specific section, the fans will leap to their feat and jockey for position as they try to get their hands on the souvenir. Fans will also have the ability to get up and head for the bathroom. Vendors will make their rounds up and down the stairs, and you'll even see security guards on patrol. All of the stadiums in the game have been completely rebuilt for this version. You'll also see volumetric grass in the outfield and the most realistic dirt around. Much like the incredible cloth technology featured in NBA 2K6, the uniforms in this game will wrinkle and flow as the players move. New gameplay features are also being introduced, such as context-based moves like leaning over a railing to snag a fly ball. And yes, 2K is throwing around the idea of including a fan at Wrigley that looks an awful lot like Steve Bartman ■■■

UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK)
> **PUBLISHER** THQ
> **DEVELOPER** RELIC ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** MARCH 14

THE OUTFIT

ESCALATING THE CONFLICT

Entertainment based on war is nothing new. From Combat on the Atari 2600 to Saving Private Ryan and Call of Duty 2, the exploits of real-life heroes are fertile ground for creating compelling entertainment. However, video games are a medium through which all of those childhood fantasies can be brought to life, without regard to the harsh realities of the often-cruel world. Developer Relic Entertainment, which has created two outstanding franchises (Homeworld and Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War) in its short existence, is taking another stab at transforming your average gamer into a larger-than-life champion of freedom. The Outfit puts players in charge of winning the secret battles of World War II, and places the full armed might of the U.S. Army at your fingertips. Strap on your helmet and lace up those boots, because The Outfit fights down in the trenches with the men – and always wins.

In the course of our extensive playthrough of an early build of The Outfit, one thing quickly became clear: This isn't your older brother's WWII game, despite its third-person action basis. While this title certainly draws inspiration from its forerunners, particularly Battlefield 1942, the central gameplay mechanic sets The Outfit well apart from anything we've seen before. Dubbed "Destruction On Demand," this feature allows players to blow a gaping hole in the genre's conventions. By spending the Field Units (FUs) earned when capturing objectives and scoring kills, players can airdrop in a huge variety of war machines, reinforcements, and stationary weapons. This ability, as you might guess, changes all the rules by fusing a strategic element to the hectic combat of a fast-paced action game. The multiplayer possibilities are nearly endless.

By being able to spawn in whatever tool best fits the current situation, players can alter the flow of battle in a heartbeat. Antipersonnel MG-42's cutting through the troops? An enormous tank should solve that problem. However, when the enemy drops in some anti-armor field guns, more infantry or a bigger tank might be necessary. With more than 40 vehicles available, as well as dozens of gun emplacements and the good old airstrike, the options at players' fingertips are extensive – provided that he or she has proven their worth to headquarters through the acquisition of FUs. A tough match can be decided by which team drains their opponents' FUs by blowing up their expensive equipment, rather than just accumulating the most kills.

Choosing which of the three heroes to respawn as is another big piece of the puzzle. With either anti-infantry, anti-vehicle, or sniping capabilities, your choice of avatar has a large impact on your ability on the battlefield. Fortunately, none of the three members of The Outfit (or their Nazi counterparts in multiplayer) are helpless when not facing their chosen foe. The sniper, J.D. Tyler, also carries a shotgun for up-close work, and his squadmembers are equipped with tank-toasting explosive charges. Tommy Mac, the antipersonnel heavy weapons specialist, can quickly take down just about anything with judicious application of the flamethrower. And The Outfit's bazooka-toting anti-vehicle soldier, Deuce Williams, can send his cohorts in to incapacitate the enemy with devestating melee attacks. Each hero has a huge amount of destructive potential just waiting to be unleashed, and exploring the myriad ways to crush the opposition is half the fun.

(Continued on page 72)



The graphical detail is impressive, given how much destruction takes place on screen



Standing around in dramatic poses is apparently a big part of war



The Nazi heroes look different, but play almost identically to the Allied forces



The destructible environments are more for show than anything else – they don't impact the gameplay much



Hold down the trigger on the flamethrower too long, and you become a suicide bomber



■ Combined-arms assaults are the way to go



■ Running over fools with vehicles is as entertaining as ever

(Continued from page 70)

Filling A Hero's Boots

The Outfit certainly sounds interesting and innovative on paper, but as we all know, a game's true worth doesn't become apparent until your hands are on the controller. Game Informer got the opportunity to do just that. And though The Outfit definitely has some areas that require further work and polish, even this early version is a blast to play. Relic has clearly achieved the feeling and tone that were its goals. Mayhem and destruction unfold constantly during nearly every second of play, and the sense of being in an active warzone is intense. However, because of the power in the player's hands, charging directly into the thick of the battle isn't something to contemplate – it's something to be embraced.

The twelve single-player missions are fairly straightforward. The player is tasked with capturing and holding a series of mostly linear objectives on a Battlefield 1942-like map, and the availability of unlimited respawns guarantees that a mission can't really be failed. Conquering the offline campaign is primarily a matter of patience; the mostly-scripted enemies aren't terribly difficult to defeat. This isn't to say that it isn't fun, but the true draw of The Outfit is clearly the robust multiplayer component. It takes full advantage of Xbox Live, offering leaderboards, stat tracking, matchmaking, and several options to customize the game's rules – but that's just dressing for the delicious meat of the gameplay.

Deathmatch and co-op are available for traditionalists, and the unique Destruction mode challenges rivals to rack up the most FUs by blowing up everything in sight, but the fourth mode stands out as something that will be played over Xbox Live for years to come. A round of Strategic Victory plays similarly to other "hold the objective" gametypes like Unreal Tournament's Onslaught or Battlefield's Conquest, but with The Outfit's special flavor. Each of the twelve maps have strategic objectives and other nodes of importance scattered throughout. Killing the enemy plays second fiddle to holding and assaulting these points. Some will drain the other team's "tickets," which is rather important since whoever runs out of tickets first loses. Others will unlock more advanced equipment in the Destruction On Demand menu; for instance, ordering up a tank is impossible unless you hold both a motor pool and an armory.

What makes this mode so entertaining in The Outfit is the fact that players can fortify their positions and spawn in whatever weaponry an assault force needs. However, these serve much more as support for the heroes and as delaying tactics to give players time to react to a lone wolf enemy trying to sneak in a quick node capture. Since the AI isn't exactly the brightest, a single well-played hero character will likely be able to eventually take down an AI-controlled force of just about any size if the other team doesn't show up. Having more AI troops and fortifications certainly plays a large role in winning player-vs-player battles, though, so earning and utilizing FUs wisely is crucial.

Certain maps are designed to be more than evenly-matched slugfests, though. In one scenario we played, the Nazis started with two control points at natural chokepoints that were easily fortified, with a stash of V1 rockets behind them that the Allies could blow up for bonus points. Because the Allies held fewer nodes, they were forced into an offensive stance to avoid slowly losing. But, after briefly breaking through the Nazi line, the Allies quickly made up lost ground by torching a few rockets. These one-off maps play out very differently than the standard levels, and require completely different strategies – though both are wildly entertaining.





■ Monocles are standard-issue for Nazi officers

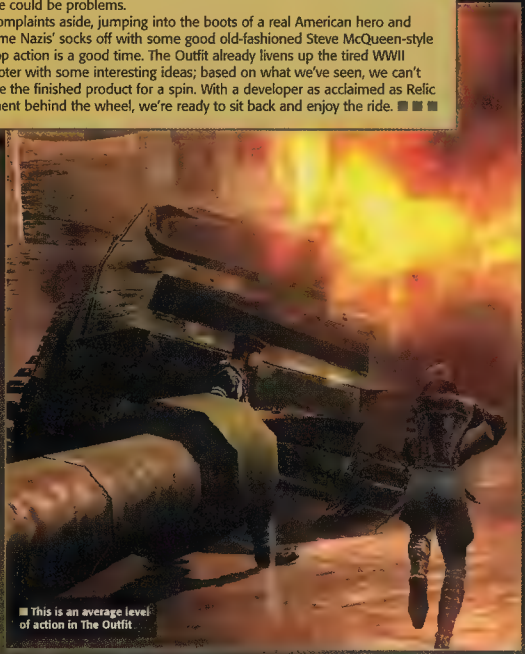
Rough And Tumble

For all that the Outfit does right, there are several areas that still require tweaking for the game to be truly great. First and foremost, the vehicle controls feel like a clumsy amalgamation of Halo-style Warthog driving and a more standard racing-like configuration. For all their power, tanks become little more than glorified metal coffins when they are too difficult to drive. Even on-foot controls have some kinks that could be worked out. Nothing is glaringly wrong, and using the Destruction On Demand system on the fly is a breeze after a little practice, but movement and aiming feel a bit imprecise and sluggish. Fortunately, these are design decisions that can easily be tweaked before release, but if The Outfit goes live without some tuning in these areas, there could be problems.

Minor complaints aside, jumping into the boots of a real American hero and rocking some Nazis' socks off with some good old-fashioned Steve McQueen-style over-the-top action is a good time. The Outfit already livens up the tired WWII action shooter with some interesting ideas; based on what we've seen, we can't wait to take the finished product for a spin. With a developer as acclaimed as Relic Entertainment behind the wheel, we're ready to sit back and enjoy the ride. ■ ■ ■



■ Airstrikes are expensive, but tend to reduce a wide area to little more than topsoil

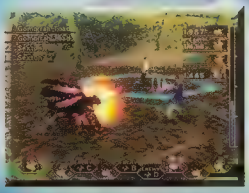
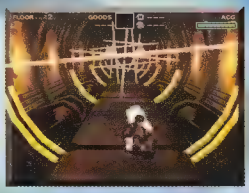


■ This is an average level of action in The Outfit

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Mild Language

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XBOX 360 | PC
» **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME
» **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
» **DEVELOPER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS
» **RELEASE** MARCH



The Elder Scrolls IV OBLIVION

Stepping into Oblivion: The First Five Hours

Ever since Game Informer's world-exclusive first look at The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion in October 2004, the game has been among the most hotly anticipated titles for the Xbox 360. As the first next-generation game to be unveiled, Oblivion set high expectations right away with superb graphics and a world of possibilities. In the past year, excitement surrounding the project has only grown as gamers learned more about the remarkably adaptable gameplay and the Radiant AI governing NPC behavior. Now, despite a delay that kept Oblivion from the Xbox 360 launch line-up, all of these pieces have fallen into place and the development team at Bethesda is putting the finishing touches on its latest masterpiece. With a release date close at hand and an abundance of information already available, it seems that the only thing left to do is actually sit down and play the game...which we did. Paying a visit to Bethesda's Maryland-based studio, Game Informer had the chance to spend some time with the Xbox 360 version of Oblivion and get a feel for how this massive adventure begins and gains momentum. From killing sewer rats to joining exclusive (and morally suspect) guilds, read on to discover what to expect in your first hours as the next great hero of Tamriel.

The Opening Ceremony: The Avatar

Oblivion could very well amaze you before the story even begins with an extensive character generator unequaled in any console game to date. After choosing from 10 races (such as elves, orcs, and the cat-like Khajiit), the player can customize the hero's miniscule facial details using a series of sliders. These tools don't merely cycle you through a selection of pre-set options, though. The entire system is actually a simplified version of the methods the developers used to create the game's NPCs. This means that even the slightest contour can be adjusted; we came across three separate sliders that moved the chin forward and backward, yet each one did it in a distinctly different way. It would be easy to spend an hour in the character generator alone, but there is a world out there that needs saving. After tweaking the appearance of our Breton (a human, magic-using race), our adventure finally began...

Hour One: The Escape

The hero woke up in the darkness of the Imperial prison, with a fellow inmate across the hall shouting various impolite phrases at him directed specially at his Breton heritage. Soon, an unexpected visitor approached the hero's cell door: Emperor Uriel Septim, accompanied by his bodyguards. As they opened the door and shuffled inside, the hero learned that his cell was the entrance to a secret escape route out of the castle, which the Emperor needed to use to evade pursuing assassins. As Septim and his entourage filed through the narrow passage, the hero took the opportunity to punch one of the guards in the back of the head. Thankfully, the guard was surprisingly tolerant of this indiscretion, though he warned the hero against repeating the action. The hero complied, instead following the group through the forgotten caves underneath the Imperial City.

With a fire spell as his primary defense, the hero fought off the goblins and rats that attacked him, though he did stop casting spells long enough to punch an advancing goblin into a swinging spike trap, sending the creature flying through the air and landing in a hilariously humiliating position. Eventually, when the hero caught up to the Emperor once again, the assassins were closing in and time was running out. Before being slaughtered, Septim gave the hero a special amulet, charging him with seeing it safely delivered to a man named Jauffre at Weynon Priory. With his Emperor dead and a mysterious quest to complete, the hero emerged from the sewers and out into the open world.



The character generator allows you to make numerous cosmetic adjustments to your avatar


These characters from the intro are more forgiving than real guards. Go ahead, give your punchin' arm a warm-up


All of your surroundings convey the sense of a living, breathing world


Using skills associated with your class allows you to gain bonuses to those abilities when you level up

Hour Two: Exploration

Looking up into the night sky, the hero took a moment to find the constellation for his birth sign. He located it among the other stars, then swam through a small lake to reach dry land. A dungeon called Vilverin was on a small island ahead of him, but he decided to continue to the Imperial City to rest and sell some excess equipment from the sewers. After a short walk, he found himself within the city gates, greeted by a guard. The hero struck up a conversation, though everything he said seemed to upset the guard until his opinion of the hero couldn't get any lower. Whether it was stress, frustration, or pure malice is hard to say, but at that point the hero gave the guard a taste of his fist, and subsequently rediscovered the comforts of the Imperial Prison.

Even though he had smuggled in a lock pick, he was unskilled with its use, and the hero was unable to break out of his cell and attempt escape. Instead, he was forced to serve out his time peacefully, though once released he was dismayed to learn that his lack of practice in confinement had decreased his skill in blocking attacks. Eavesdropping on conversations and exploring the many lively streets and shops of the town eventually led the hero to take his meager bankroll to a shop called Edgar's Discount Magic, where "You don't want the best. You want cheap." Still, it wasn't cheap enough, and the hero could afford no new spells. He was, however, fascinated by an orb on the table, and picked it up and moved it around. Though he had no intention of stealing it, Edgar saw things differently. The guards were called, and the hero was arrested again, this time for attempted theft.

Hour Three: Deliveries

On the streets again after serving more time in jail, the hero was approached by a peculiar dark elf. She handed him a note saying that his criminal record indicated he might be qualified to join the Thieves Guild. While it was an intriguing proposition, the covert meeting to determine if he could join was not until midnight, and the sun was just coming up. Instead, the hero decided that it was probably time to get cracking on the sacred quest the Emperor had imparted with his dying words.

The journey to Weynon Priory was not a long one; in fact, it felt as though the hero had been teleported there instantly. Inside, two men were in the middle of a philosophical discussion, but when interrupted, told the hero that he could find Jauffre upstairs in the library. Despite being a clever man, the conversation with Jauffre was not terribly enlightening. He knew what the amulet was, but didn't know exactly what to do with it. To complete the Emperor's request, the hero would have



■ Over 200 dungeons scattered across the world means you'll always have something to explore

to bring the amulet to Martin – a citizen of Kvatch.

Delivering the artifact to Kvatch proved to be problematic. A swirling gate to Oblivion (the realm where ancient beasts and demons were sealed away) had just opened in front of the town, turning the surrounding sky blood red and flooding the town with terrible monsters from the other world. A wizened warrior pleaded with the hero to go enter the ethereal gate and close it from the inside so Kvatch could be saved, but then the hero realized that it was nearly midnight, and he had some thieves to meet. Martin would probably be fine.

On the way back to the Imperial City, he came across a kindly old man walking on an isolated path. The hero decided to test the age-old question: "If an innocent man is killed from repeated fireballs to the face, but there are no guards nearby to arrest the murderer, does he still go to jail?" Fortunately, the answer was no.

Hour Four: The Guilds

Two other prospective Thieves Guild members (a female Wood Elf and a male Argonian) showed up to the meeting, and all three recruits were given a task: retrieve a particular diary without being detected or resorting to violence. As a sorcerer, the hero wasn't incredibly sneaky, so while his opponents rushed off, he took a moment to speak with a nearby beggar who (for a small price) informed him of the exact location where the diary was kept. Upon picking the lock and entering the home, the hero discovered that the Wood Elf had beaten him there! Remaining hidden, he observed his opponent, and when he realized that she was heading for a nearby desk, the hero burst from hiding, got to the desk first, and quickly escaped with the diary.

He turned in his trophy, and as a full-fledged member of the Thieves Guild, was given the ability to use the guild's fences to sell various ill-gotten goods. In the future, he would have the opportunity to go on special missions as an agent of the guild, but since the manuscript was the first thing he had successfully stolen, he wasn't quite qualified for the elite jobs yet. Still satisfied with his victory, he found a bed and slept until morning. At least he tried to.

He was awakened by a man dressed in black named Lucien Lachance. Lucien was a member of the Dark Brotherhood – the Assassins Guild. He explained that he knew that the hero had murdered an innocent man (the poor old guy on the isolated path), and Lucien liked it. He gave the hero an assignment to kill a man for the Brotherhood as a kind of inauguration into their secret society. However, the hero was beginning to feel that his deeds were becoming less heroic by the day, and resolved that he wouldn't murder anyone else...for a while, at least.



■ Various weapons and spells can be hotkeyed to the d-pad, allowing you to switch equipment on the fly



■ Mounts will be available to explore the world at a quicker pace

Hour Five: Vilverin

Wandering through the woods making his way to Vilverin (the dungeon he had seen when he first left the sewers), the hero noticed a pack of deer bounding through the trees. Momentarily putting aside his destination, he spent several minutes tracking them, slowly sneaking up and firing with his bow. Once he was successful, he approached the body to retrieve his arrows, but was immediately distracted by a nearby unicorn. Only one of these majestic creatures is rumored to exist in Tamriel, and the hero made use of his good fortune. Hopping on the unicorn's back, he galloped through the forests and over the plains until he reached Vilverin.

Though the passages of Vilverin were in ruins, they were far from lifeless. After contending with dark tombs, deadly traps, and waves of zombies and rats (which infected him with a disease called Bloodlung) the hero descended to the central chamber where he came face-to-face with an exiled Necromancer named Jalbert. After defeating the evil sorcerer and his undead minions, the hero rifled through his journals and learned the man's tragic story – how his dark deeds were discovered by a friend and how he had been forced out of his community. Among the journals and diaries was a rusty key, which opened a gate that led to the exit of the ancient dungeon.

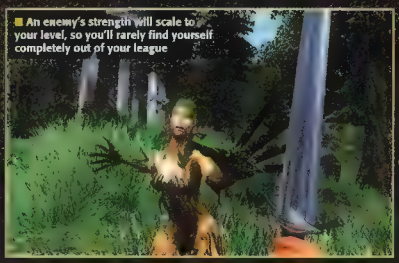
Having traveled back to the Imperial City seeking some rest and relaxation, the hero wanted to celebrate his triumph at Vilverin. He walked into a bar/inn located on a small ship anchored at the docks. He slept peacefully for a while, but his slumber was interrupted in the middle of the night by the realization that the ship had been hijacked by pirates – and no one else on board could save the passengers but him. At this point, the hero knew that even though his life may not always be easy or predictable, at least it would have plenty of excitement. He readied his spells and strolled out into the galley, ready for anything.

Impressions

If this account of Oblivion's introductory hours sounds more like a fantasy narrative than a traditional game preview, it's for good reason. Oblivion simply invites players into its immersive world to craft their own stories, generating an endless supply of fantastic moments that, somehow, feel totally natural in the world. Even though the land of Tamriel is vast, one of Oblivion's greatest successes is the way it can keep the player focused amid so many possibilities. At no point in our time with the game were we left without a goal or direction; most of the time, the biggest problem was deciding which of three of four quests we wanted to tackle first. As we wandered through towns, the many citizens were milling about and having conversations, but the complex AI governing their actions wasn't very overt. we didn't see anyone stealing to buy food or practicing any skills. Then again, most of our interactions with NPCs were in unremarkable situations, so the AI just might not have had a chance to shine.

The other technical aspects of the game have improved greatly since we saw them last, most noticeably the smoother framerate. The load times were very reasonable (though we were playing on a unit with the hard drive) and only kicked in for major area transitions. We primarily played in the first-person perspective, and found the controls to be intuitive and accessible. The hit detection felt spotty at first, but after only a few minutes we got a good sense of what we could hit and where, which isn't as easy as it sounds. Actions like firing an arrow require a certain skill as you estimate its arc and adjust your angle accordingly, and effective spellcasting means anticipating your opponent's movements and aiming for where they will be rather than where they are. Minigames for persuasion and lockpicking offer a break from the action, and throwing loose objects in the environment is great fun. Just be sure that you don't throw someone else's property unless you want to go to jail for stealing like we did. Several times.

All of the elements of Oblivion have come together to form a compelling and visually amazing experience with a depth that is only possible on a next-gen console. A word of advice to anyone who was disappointed that they couldn't pick this up on day one of the Xbox 360: play the hell out of your launch games now, because when Oblivion hits, you might not want to play anything else for a while. ■■■



■ An enemy's strength will scale to your level, so you'll rarely find yourself completely out of your league



■ Bandits [illegible] their own business. Whether to interrupt them is up to you



■ The Imperial City is just one of many destinations in Tamriel





The level of destruction brought about by a concentrated assault is no joke

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars

> STYLE 1 PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** SPLASH DAMAGE/ID SOFTWARE **> RELEASE** 2006

THE BATTLEFIELD OF THE FUTURE

Throw any comparisons, good or bad, to Quake 4 out the window right now – Enemy Territory: Quake Wars has a plethora of its own unique reasons to be on your radar. London-based developer Splash Damage (which did the fantastic Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory) and Quake originator id Software are undertaking a hugely ambitious project with this team-based online-only shooter. Slapping a sci-fi Quake skin on Battlefield 2 gameplay would be a relatively simple (and no doubt lucrative) endeavor, but what Splash Damage has planned for Quake Wars goes far beyond that.

A round of Quake Wars is, at its core, similar to Unreal Tournament's Assault mode. Depending on the map, the Earth forces and the invading Strogg will be on offense or defense, with a set of goals to achieve in a certain order. However, unlike UT's Assault, the way in which your team approaches objectives is up to you. On the map we saw during Splash Damage's recent visit to our offices, the humans had to get a mobile command post across a river and deploy it in preperation for a full-on assault. Two paths were big enough to permit its passage, each with its own set of advantages. The tunnel, for instance, could be easily clogged by the Strogg, while the bridge offered a more open battlefield at the cost of vulnerability to air-strikes. These types of choices will be present throughout the offensive team's progress through the scenario, giving a huge variety of ways that any given map can unfold.

There's a lot of room to talk about how cool each of the four classes for each side are, and how interesting their different roles can be, but there's something else you need to know about first: the Solo Assignment System. This brilliant addition will, if everything goes as planned, help newbies and veterans alike stay on task and contribute to the war effort. Basically, the game will offer you missions that need to be attended to, which may or may not be directly related to your team's objectives. For instance, as a soldier class, you may be tasked with setting the charges to blow open a door that your mobile command post has to get through – thereby working toward a primary objective. However, a player with the field operative class might get a mission to go take out a deployed Strogg gun turret that your radar has detected – a task not strictly part of your team's goals, but no less important for that. The Solo Assignment System will even take into account the composition of your four- or five-person squad when giving out more complicated missions. What's more, it will hand out jobs based on your experience as a player, thanks to the game's extensive stat-tracking. Thus, you won't be told to single-handedly infiltrate the enemy base if you're just starting out – only veterans will receive orders of that magnitude. If it works as well as Splash Damage wants it to, this feature will go a long way toward forging a random sixteen-person team into a bona fide army.

From the new rendering techniques that give it a draw distance of the natural horizon to the innovative ways that each side deploys war machines like artillery and vehicles, Quake Wars has a lot more going for it than we could possibly tell you about right now. After seeing it in action, though, we have to say that this is easily one of the most exciting titles coming up for 2006. And that's saying a lot. ■ ■ ■

WHAT ABOUT CONSOLES?

We asked Splash Damage very bluntly about the possibility of Quake Wars coming to next-gen consoles, and got a surprisingly straightforward answer. Basically, in order to get the game released in a reasonable timeframe, the developer is working only on the PC platform right now. However, many of the design decisions, from the interface to the core technology, are being made with a move to consoles in mind. So don't be too surprised if there's an announcement made in the coming months about further versions of this title.



Deploying structures is key to both offense and defense



The draw distance is limited not by technology, but consciously by the map designers



The Strogg may be ghastly and evil, but they sure are fun to play



XBOX 360 | PLAYSTATION 3 | PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Fight Night Round 3

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER FIGHTING (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR PS2 ONLINE, PS3 ONLINE TBA)
> PUBLISHER ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** EA CHICAGO **> RELEASE** MARCH

INTO THE RING

Ever since we visited EA's Chicago studio to bring the world our exclusive first look at Fight Night Round 3 a few months ago, we've been dying to get our hands on the game. Well, now we've gotten a chance to go a few rounds with both the 360 and Xbox versions of the boxing game, and we're just as stunned as we would be if we took a right hook to the head from Mike Tyson.

Let's get something out of the way right now: Even if you have no interest in boxing, Fight Night Round 3 is a title that should be on your radar. In no uncertain terms, Round 3 is the best-looking 360 game yet. These screenshots clearly display the eerie realism of the boxers and the environments, but they can't convey the fluid animation or the sheer brutality of the matches. When we first fired up the 360 build, a crowd quickly gathered to watch the maiden match unfold, and everyone was quickly wincing and cheering at each devastating punch, just like a real boxing match. In short, this is the game to justify buying a $400 gaming machine to your significant other.

As impressive as the visuals are, the all-analog control is the real appeal of this boxing franchise, and the brilliant control scheme returns, albeit with a slightly different feel. As the 360 version of Round 3 is designed to be the most realistic boxing game yet, punches felt a little slower than the current-gen version (although the team is still tweaking the speed), and blocking is more ambiguous. But don't take this as criticism – with the velocity of punches varying by weight class and fatigue, as well as the absolute lack of any onscreen HUD, Round 3 feels like you're actually in the ring, facing off with real-life champions. On the 360, Round 3 is as immersive as video games get.

The innovations added in Round 2 are all back with new tweaks, such as cutman minigames between rounds, the Haymaker punch, and Career mode. More features have been added as well, including ESPN Classic fights, new power punches, and a swanky new first-person mode that isn't quite what you'd expect. In other words, Round 3 continues the series' tradition of hugely improving on an already-excellent series. If you haven't played a Fight Night game yet, Round 3 is the perfect time to start. And if you have played the previous games, you simply have no excuse not to step into the ring again. ■ ■ ■



■ ESPN Classic fights let you relive infamous confrontations



■ "Achoo!"



The in-game boxers all look distinct and realistic, thanks to exhaustive examination of their real-life counterparts



The new Super-punch feature replays knockdown punches in punishing slow motion



"There's a mosquito on your chin. Here, let me get that for you."

In This Corner

While we spent the majority of our in-ring time with the 360 version of Round 3, we also took a look at the Xbox build of the game. It obviously doesn't look as good as the next-gen version, but it is still impressive – better than the last two games, which were both gorgeous. The thing that we noticed most prominently was the difference in feel. While the 360 version strives for realism, the current-gen release feels a little faster and more arcade-styled. Although both versions are still being tweaked, the current-gen release simply can't match the realism of the 360 version – although it's still great fun in its own right.





UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360 | XBOX

Blazing Angels: Squadrons of World War II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR SYSTEM LINK) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** UBISOFT ROMANIA **> RELEASE** MARCH

IN THE COCKPIT

With one glimpse of the amazing Xbox 360 screenshots in our exclusive first look at the next-gen version of Blazing Angels last month, flight sim fanatics around the world took off their aviator glasses, paused their 400th viewing of *Top Gun*, and took notice of this beautiful game. These stunning visuals made us join the ranks of wannabe Mavericks who simply couldn't wait to get their paws on the game and see if it handled as good as it looks. Well, that wait is now over, as the Game Informer branch of the Junior Pilot's Club was fortunate enough to get some hands-on time with both the Xbox and Xbox 360 versions of the game.

In our exclusive playtest of Blazing Angels, we soared through three stages of the Xbox build and two levels of the 360 version, as well as some training missions. On both versions, Blazing Angels sports an arcade feel that's easy to learn, but maintains a solid degree of realism – you always feel like you're flying a WWII aircraft, and never a high tech fighter or spaceship. The realism is accentuated by massive cities that sprawl out below you, and a similarly large number of aircraft. Especially in the 360 version, the skies of Blazing Angels are a crowded place, as dogfights involve dozens of airplanes, billows of smoke and flame, and huge, rolling clouds. But things never get too confusing, thanks to a smartly designed camera system. By pulling the left trigger, you lock onto a selected target, and pushing the thumbstick will cause your plane to roll into attack position. It's a simple, elegant system that makes targeting a breeze and prevents nasty camera hitches.

Of course, you aren't a lone hero in this game, and you can just as easily send your squadmates after a target rather than pursue it yourself. Mapped to the d-pad are squad commands, and your three friends can be selected individually or as a group. Each of your teammates has unique abilities as well, the most useful of which is your squad mechanic. If you take heavy damage, you can have him talk you through in-flight repairs, which means hitting a short series of keys to repair damage. There are no parachuting boxes of armor upgrades or other powerups in Blazing Angels, so taking advantage of this ability is key to survival.

There are a few other nice touches that we noticed in our Blazing Angels playtest, such as the need to manually start your prop by rotating the thumbstick and priming the engine by hitting the A button repeatedly during takeoff. These mechanics, as small as they may be, really speak to the care that Ubisoft Romania is putting into this game. Based on our time with Blazing Angels, it's clear that this is one game that flight sim fans simply won't want to miss. ■■■



■ **"I can't see anything up here! Which way to the dogfight, kind sir?"**





"This is Sgt. Fred, I'm going down! Can you return my copy of *Maid in Manhattan* to Hollywood Video for me?"



"London bridge is falling down, falling down... well, it will be when I'm finished with it"

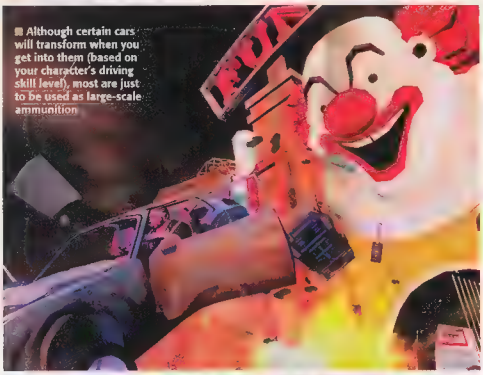


This deleted scene from *Jaws: The Revenge* shows the trouble they went to to catch that pesky shark



"Well, that's a pretty big clock, I guess. I'm pretty sure mine is bigger."





■ Although certain cars will transform when you get into them (based on your character's driving skill level), most are just to be used as large-scale ammunition



■ Hmmm... Clearly labeled gas canisters just ripe for the picking

XBOX 360

Crackdown

> STYLE 1 OR 2-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE, SYSTEM LINK TBD) **> PUBLISHER** MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
> DEVELOPER REAL TIME WORLDS **> RELEASE** FALL

THE POWER OF YOUR IMAGINATION

What if the main feature of a game is dependent on the creativity of its players? While Crackdown is still a ways out (and even further since we last covered it, as the release has now been pushed to fall), developer Real Time Worlds has always been forthcoming about its next-gen title. The game is poised to reset the status quo of sandbox titles by giving players what they always thought they had, but really didn't – freedom.

Crackdown has its fingers on the pulse of current sandbox titles, but is making the entire experience more personal, more creative, and more intuitive. The skills of your agent rise with every action performed – whether or not you're on a mission, driving around town boosts your automotive skills and climbing to the top of buildings increases your strength. Making the goof-off sections of an open world pertinent to the crime fighting meat of the story mode encourages and rewards players for just doing what they want to do.

Without player creativity, though, the game's pacing could falter. The greatest moments in Crackdown appear to be those wacky ideas thought of among friends. Offering the first cooperative gameplay in the genre, two gamers can concoct elaborate strategies to access otherwise off-limits areas. At the publisher's X05 event in Amsterdam, a live demonstration had one agent drive a car off the roof of a high building and jump out just in time for his buddy to precisely blow the gas tank, making a common real-world item into a two-ton flaming wrecking ball.

With the rest of the world being just as interactive, the entire game screams for player-created action sequences in the vein of *MacGyver*, *Die Hard*, and even *The Road Warrior*. In other words, if you don't have fun with this game, there's no one to blame but yourself.

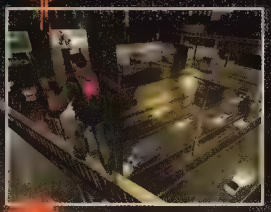
That is only true, though, if every ambitious plan the developers have comes to fruition. Cooperative play is almost required in our mind – after all, what fun is it to execute these ballets of destruction if there's no one there to help you out? In addition, the plan of player-created mountains of in-game objects as a means to access higher areas necessitates that the game doesn't confuse when you mangled a car for fun or for a purpose.

One decision that the team has made gives us much hope for the rest of the title. The art style, which is shaping up to be downright cool since we last saw the game, was chosen to require less processing power than a photo-realistic setting. Freeing up that computing power enables Crackdown's ambitious feature list. But besides technical freedom, the decision also poses the question, "Does next-gen really have to mean photo-real?" If everything shakes out in the end, the answer is certainly no, but it also might mean that our old-fashioned creativity is really the next next-gen. ■■■

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UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX 360

Burnout Revenge

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER RACING (2 TO 6-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS > **DEVELOPER** CRITERION > **RELEASE** MARCH

MASSIVE ONLINE PILEUP

While it doesn't have the commercial clout of Gran Turismo or EA's own Need for Speed series, hardcore gamers have long considered Burnout one of racing's most exciting and visceral franchises. After launching a highly praised version of Burnout Revenge on current-gen systems, developer Criterion is gearing up to bring the game to Microsoft's Xbox 360. Executive producer Matt Webster seemed excited about the possibilities this new system can provide the already stellar title.

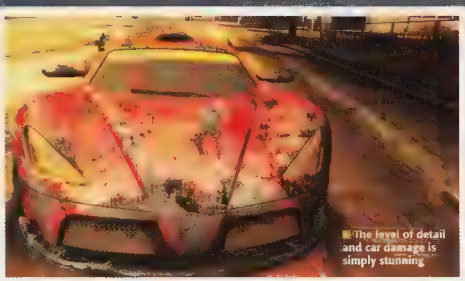
"This will be the showcase version of our game," comments Webster, "and when we starting work on it, we looked at the areas that we most wanted to concentrate on – areas where we could take Revenge further. We're big believers in Microsoft's focus on creating a next-generation online experience with the 360, so I think you'll see that online has also been one of the main focuses in bringing Burnout to the console. Awesome high-def graphics and effects are amazing, but a given. We saw there was room to push the envelope with Burnout Revenge and deliver an online experience that takes advantage of the 360 as well."

The most notable way in which Criterion is pushing the online envelope is with the revamped, Xbox Live-enabled Revenge mode. Webster said that the team looked at the current online racing model, and attempted to come up with a way to make it more compelling to players.

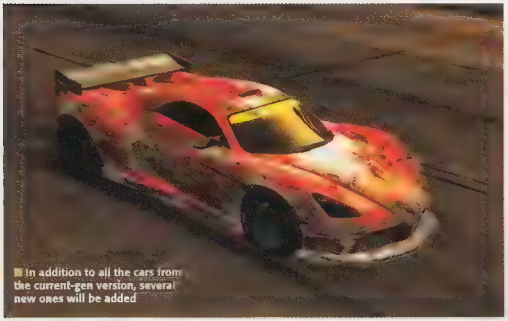
"Live Revenge came from looking and playing a lot of online games," said Webster. "They all pretty much followed the same formula. Join up with X number of players, play the game, return to lobby. We felt that with the combative, aggressive action that we had, and the essence of Revenge, that we could try something that hadn't really been attempted before. Live Revenge is about the game tracking the relationships that you have when you play gamers online. Take someone down, and you generate a persistent Revenge Rival. We track the score, we tell you when they are in the same game, and we make sure that we highlight and call them out to you just before the race starts."



Needless to say, real-time reflection mapping and texturing is much improved on the 360 version



The level of detail and car damage is simply stunning



In addition to all the cars from the current-gen version, several new ones will be added

We can only imagine the possibilities, and Revenge mode is just one way in which Burnout will push the boundaries of vehicular mayhem. Webster describes Traffic Attack mode as "hockey with cars," and promises that the power of the 360 will allow them to not only push car density to new heights, but also implement new deformation and explosive effects. All this will combine to create over-the-top moments, and – finally – you'll now be able to share your best replays with other Burnout players the world over through Xbox Live. After viewing other players' clips, you'll be able to rate them, and EA will post a Top 20 chart of the most explosive replays on Xbox Live.

Of course, the single-player elements of Burnout Revenge will be (mostly) the same excellent races and contests that you've experienced before, with a few key improvements. The Eastern Bay location has been rebuilt to correct flaws the team felt were in the original, and 10 new crash junctions have been added. An as-yet-unspecified number of new vehicles will be added to all three classes (Race, Muscle, and Crash), and Webster told us that downloadable new content is definitely in the plan for the future.

Burnout Revenge is a great game, and the new Xbox Live functions will ensure that this version is the best yet. If you haven't yet experienced it, you owe it to yourself to take it for a spin. Even veteran players might be tempted to buy it all over again, if only to get in on the online mayhem. ■■■



The 360 version's detailed environments recall the look of EA's 360 port of Need for Speed: Most Wanted



Notice the motion blur effects



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Grandia III

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** SQUARE ENIX **> DEVELOPER** GAME ARTS **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY

MILFS AND MAGIC

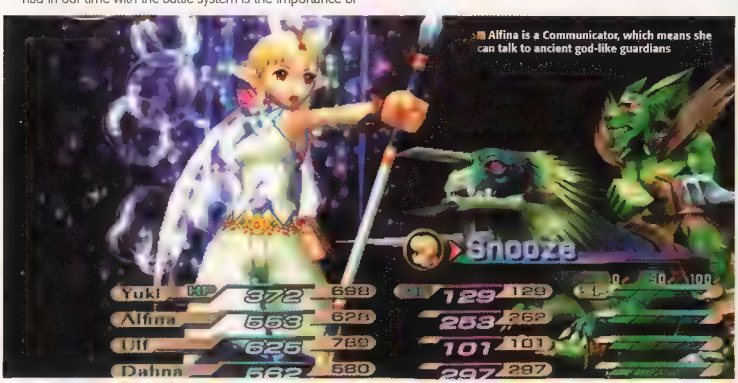
While some RPG fanatics are focusing on the things Square Enix has on the distant horizon (like Kingdom Hearts 2 and Final Fantasy XII), a quick look into the immediate future reveals that the landscape is far from barren. The latest entry in the Grandia series is practically on our doorsteps, and after spending a few hours with the latest build, it's clear that the title is more than just filler between major releases.

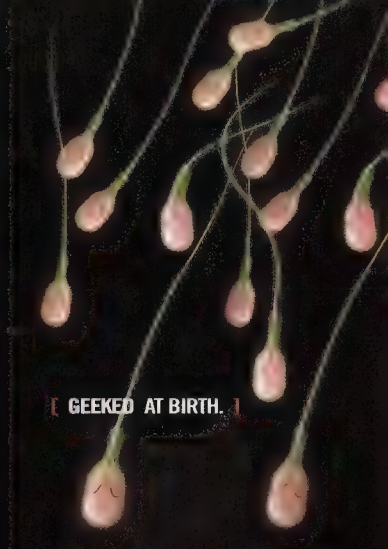
The story begins with a typical small-town hero named Yuki who dreams of building an airplane, but quickly spirals into new territory as he gets tangled up with a girl named Alfina and her sinister brother Emelious. Throughout the adventure players use a combat system that is somewhere between turn-based and real-time, with an on-screen gauge showing the turn order, as well as the ideal moments for strategic blows that cancel a foe's pending actions.

The combat is fast-paced, and the only real concern we had in our time with the battle system is the importance of proximity. Some attacks only affect a certain area in relation to the combatant, but the player has no control over how the party moves around, allowing for the possibility of poor positioning at a critical moment. But when the timing and location work out, the aerial combo attacks look amazing.

When you aren't in battle, Grandia III gives you plenty of gorgeous things to keep you occupied. The FMV sequences and other cutscenes are portrayed in a striking visual style similar to Tri-Ace's Star Ocean: Till The End of Time, and you may find yourself confronting some confusing feelings for Yuki's uncommonly attractive young mother, Miranda. Oedipus, table for two?

Even if your romantic inclinations don't belong in a Greek tragedy, don't count Grandia III out just yet. Fun battle mechanics, entertaining dialogue, and some endearing characters make this one of Square Enix's upcoming titles you didn't know you should be paying attention to. ■ ■ ■





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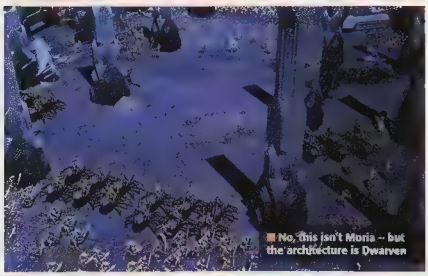


Supposedly, ship combat is a much bigger part of BFME II

(XBOX 360 SCREENS SHOWN)



As if it weren't obvious, these Xbox 360 screens prove the machine to be capable of handling the game



No, this isn't Moria – but the architecture is Dwarven



Goblins require the aid of much stronger allies to hope to match the might of the Elves

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XBOX 360 | PC

The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS **> DEVELOPER** EALA **> RELEASE** SUMMER (XBOX 360), MARCH 2 (PC)

REDEFINING CONSOLE RTS

Real-time strategy games on console have always been a bit of a mess. Primarily consisting of ports of popular PC titles, the genre has never found a groove in the living room. No matter how great the original game was, trying to map a mouse-and-keyboard interface to a controller invariably resulted in a clunky, frustrating experience. However, the draw has always been there for publishers to try and bring their best-selling PC games into the huge console market. Enter Louis Castle, VP of creative development at Electronic Arts' massive LA studio, and the man who is largely responsible for opening the door to The Battle for Middle-earth's move to console.

"In the past, most control schemes for console strategy games were interpretations of mouse and keyboard commands and were therefore fundamentally flawed," states Castle. For the last year and a half – long before he was attached to the Battle for Middle-earth project – Castle has been working on a new way for console players to command the mighty armies of an RTS title. Now, he thinks he has the solution. "Our control scheme gives the console player very familiar control over the camera, and then uses the context of the camera as the primary way to determine what elements of the game the player will act on," Castle explains. The idea is to make an interface that isn't an adaptation of mouse-and-keyboard control, but something that intuitively makes sense on a gamepad. While the specifics of the control scheme are as yet unknown, Castle's words and enthusiasm are enough to make us eager to try it out for ourselves.

Moving a real-time strategy title from being a PC-only experience to something that feels right when played from the comfort of your couch doesn't end with some crazy new interface, though. "Since this game started as an effort independent of a property, we are not treating it as a content port. To do so would put us on the path to repeat many mistakes from the past," says Castle. "We will definitely change things based on our expectation of what would be the best experience for our Xbox 360 target audience and what works best for the system." What exactly this means hasn't been disclosed to us yet, but we suspect that any changes will fall mostly into the category of "tweaks" to make the title a little more console-friendly, rather than sweeping alterations to the nature of the gameplay.

One final tantalizing bit of information coming out of EALA is that The Battle for Middle-earth II on 360 will feature some exclusive new multiplayer modes for taking the War in the North to Xbox Live. "We understand how important online play is for Xbox 360 players and want to bring the best online experience to them," Castle informs us. We're pretty confident that this statement means something awesome, but we'll have to wait and see. Either way, the prospect of having a decent way to play RTS in high-def, surround sound glory in our living rooms is a delicious one. ■■■

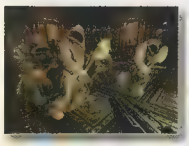
HANG UP YOUR HALO.

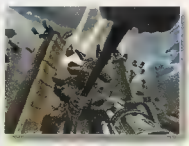
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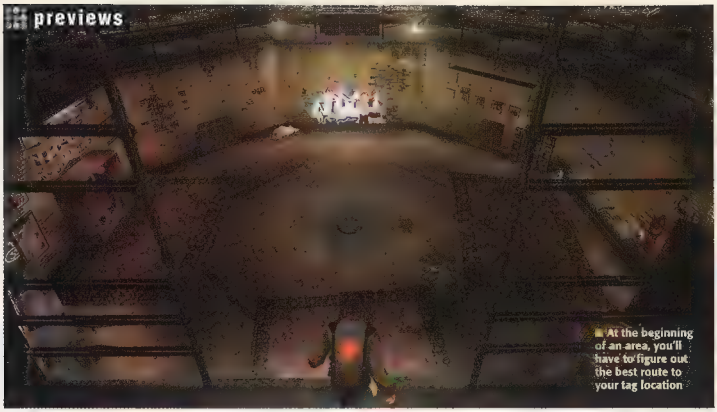


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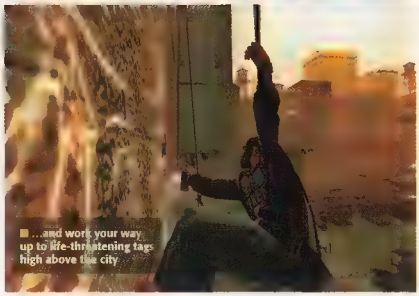
Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.



At the beginning of an area, you'll have to figure out the best route to your tag location



You'll start by hitting easily reached spots...



...and work your way up to life-threatening tags high above the city

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM **> PUBLISHER** ATARI **> DEVELOPER** THE COLLECTIVE **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY

TRUE B-BOY CULTURE

Fashion heavyweight Marc Ecko's first voyage into the world of game development, Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure has been watched by the industry with varying degrees of excitement and skepticism. Obviously, with the popularity of urban culture at an all-time high, the game has a very real possibility to tap into a new, growing market for titles informed by the streets by emphasizing one of the most overlooked aspects of hip-hop – graffiti writing

Although a few titles have already included aspects of graffiti, most notably Jet Grind Radio and The Warriors, Ecko, a former tagger himself, is in a unique position to help craft a title in which graffiti is the focus of the gameplay, not just used for side-missions or bonus objectives. However, this untested design does present its share of risk; will this non-traditional formula resonate with mainstream action fans?

After getting our hands on a playable build of the game, we were curious to see how this novel concept would play out in practice. One thing is clear: Getting Up is quite a different game than the others its "urban" theme has led some media outlets to lazily lump it in with. In its own way, Getting Up is really a platformer, owing more to the vertical exploration of the Prince of Persia series than 50 Cent: Bulletproof's simple gunplay.

Entering an area, you'll usually be given a basic graffiti-based objective. Some of these will be simple marker tags on easily accessible spots. However, it's usually not so simple. Often the spots you need to tag for your objectives are high above you, forcing you to use the easy and intuitive interface to pull off some hair-raising acrobatic maneuvers. By either climbing up poles or performing Mario-style wall jumps, you'll eventually reach high ledges and pipes above the city (or subway) floor. As Trane's (the protagonist's) movements and balance usually auto-adjust, you'll rarely fall off a ledge or precipice. Rather, the platforming becomes a sort of visual puzzle, as you have to figure out the correct steps to take to reach the spot you're supposed to tag.

Once you've reached your goal, it's time to lay down one of the game's dozens of tags (including over 65 pieces from real-life legends like Cope 2 and Futura). In terms of mechanics, it's fairly unique, a middle ground between the overly simple controls of Jet Grind and the more exacting stenciling of The Warriors. The outline of the piece will appear on the wall, and after giving your can a good shake, you use the right analog to sweep Trane's arm over the piece, which gradually fills in. However, it is skill based, as you must maintain a smooth flow, not pausing over one area too long, lest you leave drips and diminish your respect among your fellow taggers.

Of course, as graffiti is a crime against the state in the game's dystopian New Radius, you'll often have to contend with guards, workers, and policemen while you attempt to boost and help spread the cause of freedom throughout the city. While it's usually best to evade the authorities, sometimes you'll be forced to fight, which plays out with a simple brawler mechanic that will be familiar to anyone who's played a third-person action game in the last 10 years. Despite a cool, breakdance-influenced dodge move, right now the fighting is definitely the least compelling part of Getting Up. Hopefully, The Collective can make some improvements to make this element of the gameplay the equal of the graffiti sequences. Despite some balance and polishing issues yet to be resolved, we still think Getting Up has great promise, as it attempts to boldly reinvent the platformer for a new generation. ■ ■ ■

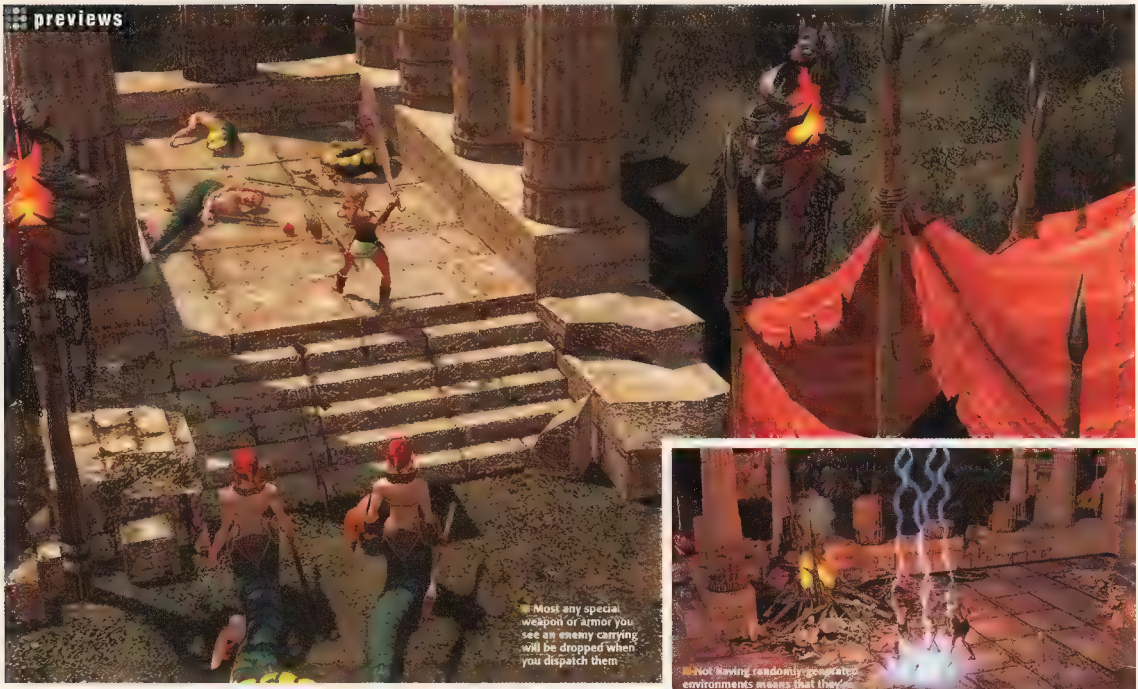


Getting Up revolves heavily around acrobatic exploration and platforming



The fighting is passable at this point, but not excellent

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Most any special weapon or armor you see an enemy carrying will be dropped when you dispatch them

PC

Titan Quest

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) **> PUBLISHER** THQ **> DEVELOPER** IRON LORE STUDIOS
> RELEASE SPRING

THE ANCIENT ART OF FATTY LOOTS

It's been a while since the PC crowd has gotten a truly new action/RPG to sink their collective teeth into. Iron Lore Studios (which has Ensemble Studios co-founder Brian Sullivan at the helm) is coming to the rescue with the company's first offering, a next-gen action/RPG set in the ancient world of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian mythology. Titan Quest has everything you'd expect out of a triple-A PC game in terms of gorgeous visuals and advanced technology, with an interesting setting and some cool gameplay features to boot. You'll hack through hordes of enemies, of course, and gain experience and loot on the way – but here, you'll do it in style.

Aside from the finely detailed modeling on everything from trees to ancient mummies, Titan Quest's proprietary engine allows for highly interactive environments that create a great feeling of immersion. Grass that both blows in the wind and swishes aside as you pass through it may sound like a very minor feature, but when you consider that most everything in the world reacts to you similarly, it really adds up to draw you into the gameworld. Full real-time dynamic lighting on everything, including sunbeams passing through foliage to create accurate shadows that shift as the tree shakes, certainly doesn't hurt either.

Sure, Titan Quest is beautiful, but the real meat of any action/RPG is in the character advancement. The requisite random drops of powerful magic items are certainly present, but the skill and magic system is definitely the crowning jewel of Titan Quest's gameplay. Of the eight possible subclasses, you'll pick two for your hero. Each of these specializations holds an entire skill tree filled with fun powers, but only a few active skills to choose from. However, as you level up and progress through the tree, you'll unlock upgrades to those spells, which grant additional effects. For instance, your basic ice blast might start as a simple damage spell at level one. At level 10, it could get a slow effect tacked on to it. Then, at level 20, maybe it will freeze an enemy in place for a period of time. This example is totally hypothetical, but the idea is clear: Rather than making players mess around with dozens of different skills, they'll only have to manage a few, but they'll be totally awesome.

Little touches, like fire attacks burning off the wrappings of a mummy and leaving a charred skeleton behind (which continues to try to eat your brains, of course) add a flavor to Titan Quest that so many fantasy hack n' slashers lack. The inclusion of several ancient cities and their famous wonders, like the Parthenon in Athens and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, should help distinguish this title as well. In all, Titan Quest looks to be well on its way to providing another entertaining way to grind up some experience and have some epic adventures – but we can't complain. We're suckers for rare item drops and cool bosses. ■■■

Not having randomly generated environments means that they can create some of the prettiest settings around



Both the grass and the water react to your passage realistically



Surprisingly, never putting armor on their legs doesn't impede the martial prowess of female adventurers

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turbine

Prospero Group

*Beta code is for use exclusive with the Beta program for up to 10 days, subject to continuation of the program and network and power availability.

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PSP

Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/RPG (2 TO 4-PLAYER VIA INFRASTRUCTURE OR AD-HOC) **> PUBLISHER** SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
> DEVELOPER SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT **> RELEASE** MARCH

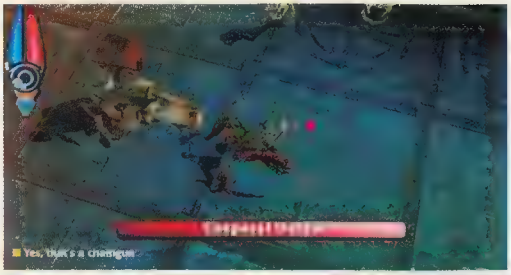
SERIOUS SEQUEL

At long last, we got a chance to test out an early playable build of Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code, and we were definitely impressed by the progress that Sony Online Entertainment has made in the last few months. Though the list of improvements for this sequel is rather extensive, we're happy to report that the majority of them seem to be functional already. Combat is definitely more interactive with the addition of attacks of opportunity and charge-up strikes, and the game has a much more interesting art style to match its drastically improved engine. And yes, you still totally run around and kill a bunch of stuff to gain levels and loot – because what's an action/RPG without that?

The first thing you'll notice is that the tone in The Warrior's Code has taken a definite turn for the awesome. Right off the bat, the character descriptions let you know that no matter which hero you choose, you're in for some serious hack n' slash. The mercenary, for instance, doesn't just wield a gigantic axe – she carries a freaking sawblade launcher for long-distance combat. Even the most straightforward skull-bashing melee character has a plethora of sweet spells to help tear through enemies. From level one, no matter which of the five heroes you pick, you don't just kill bad guys. You seriously mess them up. The distinctive attack and spell animations go a long way towards furthering the illusion, and the overall effect is that you feel cool, even if you are just killing slimes. And, transforming into an unstoppable beast form with its own special attacks is flat-out hilarious.

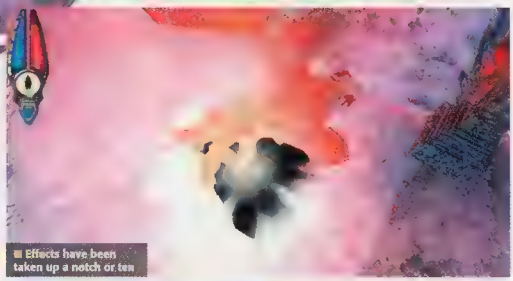
The tweaks to combat in The Warrior's Code are subtle, but add up to making things a bit more depth than just mashing the X button and grabbing some loot after everything dies. It can be tough to use the attacks of opportunity and charge attacks properly, since you tend to be locked into your swinging animation for the majority of the time you're in combat. However, if you're able to pull them off, they can give you a small edge in battle, particularly in boss fights. Squaring off against these gigantic baddies is pretty fun to start with, but once you realize that they have certain weak spots in their attack patterns, taking advantage of them to stomp the boss even harder makes winning these fights that much more satisfying.

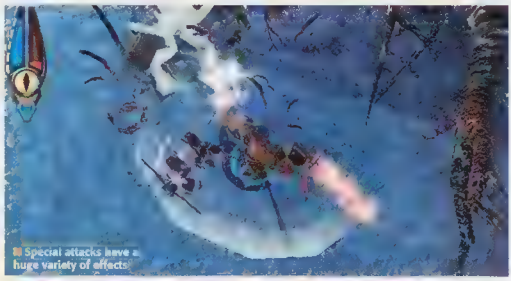
Minor additions and improvements throughout much of the game, especially the infinitely-better menu system and streamlined control scheme, make the experience noticably smoother on the whole. Even though we only got to play through the first few levels, we're confident that The Warrior's Code will be a solid dungeon-crawler at the very least when it ships in March. ■ ■ ■

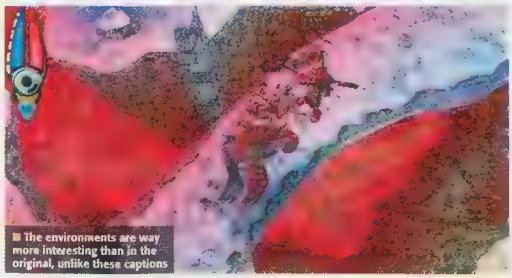

Yes, that's a challenge!



The boss fights are fitting for the game's epic scale


Effects have been taken up a notch or ten


Special attacks have a huge variety of effects


The environments are way more interesting than in the original, unlike these captions

GamersOnGames Online Chat Ultimate1

Ultimate1: dOOds!!! Do you have a GStop ValueCard yet??? It rOxOrs! Saves 10% on used games and dvds!!! Even YOU could score one!!! =)

DevBoy_3: What? you work for them or something? I can't get a new card anyways -- my credit's shot!

Ultimate1: nOOb!! It's not a credit card!!! It's a discount card!!! Plus you get coupons too -- on top of the card discounts!!1!!111

DevBoy_3: sweet!!!

gamestop ftw!!!



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GAMER TIME

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Game Day

To Wall Street, It's a Corporate Merger. To *Gamers*, It's a Flippin' Bonus Game.

What Does the GameStop and EB Games Merger Really Mean?

DALLAS, Texas — You can read the papers or blogs on this deal and they'll all speculate what the merger of GameStop and EB Games means to gamers. The companies themselves tell us that this means the best values on new and used games will continue to be the market climate. Service—the best service—they say, will be had by all. The list continues with the claim that they'll be the first to get the newest systems and newest games. Sales associates will know their stuff, unlike the typical big box retailer. Reservations will be taken on all the hot new titles. And there will be in-store tournaments. There will now be over 4,000 stores in the chain dedicated to the video and PC game category.

You can take the survey to the streets and ask real gamers what they think and you'll get answers like: "Wha...?" "Just a sec. I'm on level six and I can't talk right now." And "Yeah, I heard about that merger. Too bad all my dough was wrapped up in Cisco Systems and Merck to get in on the deal." All in all, the gamers were either uninterested or too busy counting their change at the Orange Julius to give us satisfactory responses. Suffice it to say, the real gamer cares about gaming and not mergers. With that, they probably won't notice much of a difference at all. And that's probably okay.

More F

Up To The Mi

Are you really reading this cop
off at the right side of the pa
obviously not meant to be read? I
time do you have on your hands?
some? Hey, would you be my secr
Because you and I are the only tw
will ever read this. And that mean
got a special connection. Okay, n
freaking *myself* out! But there's a v
umn to complete here. What am
do? Help!

Hello again, secret friend. You
there? Me too. Just sitting h
and thinking about how many wo
takes to fill a column like this. If
real reporter, which would be real
have something interesting—or at
somewhat important to report abo
instead, I'm just keeping you and
by filling a few moments of our li
the idle ramblings of my mind.

There's not much more left in
hollow shell of a writer anyw
Anyone will tell you that. Never h
to say. What's worth talking about
I'd rather just sit in the corner and
across the room thinking about n
Actually, that's not true. There are
great books I'd like to read.

You like to read? Well, yes, you
do. Then you probably feel th
way. Why communicate in person
you can read beautiful words on p

It's almost time for us to say goo
When this column no longer ca
on the page, our relationship will
will you forget me? I wonder. Gue



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PC

Heroes of Might & Magic V

> STYLE 1-PLAYER STRATEGY (MULTIPLAYER TBA) **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** NIVAL INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** MARCH

AN OLD FAVORITE REBORN

Armed with a brand-new fully 3D graphics engine and a mandate from publisher Ubisoft to set up a whole new world for the Might & Magic series to live in, Silent Storm developer Nival Interactive is aiming high with Heroes of Might & Magic V. Even those with little patience for the traditional slow pace of strategy titles may want to give this a look.

The basic idea behind the game, just like in the series' older entries, is to deliver a turn-based empire builder that foregoes the intricacies of Civilization and similar titles for exciting battles and streamlined gameplay. The varied abilities of the units – an army can contain anything from swordsmen to medusae and dragons – as well as the titular heroes' capabilities to drastically alter the outcome of battle make this much flashier than your standard strategy game. The fact that cities take a mere few turns to fully upgrade, provided you have the requisite funds, ensures that you spend a lot more of your time out exploring, adventuring, and waging terrible wars of conquest than prancing around building libraries and parks. If this all sounds similar to the first four titles in the franchise, it's for good reason. Everything we've heard from Ubisoft and Nival indicates that Heroes V should be very similar in tone – a fact we couldn't be happier about.

Beyond the obvious huge upgrades in presentation, Heroes V also offers a few key improvements to the gameplay of previous iterations. First is that units will have many more unique attacks that don't follow the normal rules – for instance, Magi will shoot in a straight line that damages everything in its path. This ought to spice up the strategy of individual conflicts quite a bit. Also, each of the six factions will have access to a special ability, like the humans upgrading their troops or the wizards outfitting their armies with mini-artifacts. With any luck, these tweaks will add up to a fantastic time for PC gamers when the game launches in March. ■ ■ ■



UNLIMITED ENABLED

PSP

Exit



> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION/PUZZLE **> PUBLISHER** UBISOFT **> DEVELOPER** TAITO **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY

TO THE RESCUE



The PSP's software lineup is improving all the time, but each truly original title for the platform (read: not a port or sequel) is greatly appreciated. Fresh, funky games like Exit are especially welcome. Published by Ubisoft, this action/puzzle game features both unique gameplay and stylish visuals, making it one of the most interesting upcoming PSP games we've seen in a while.

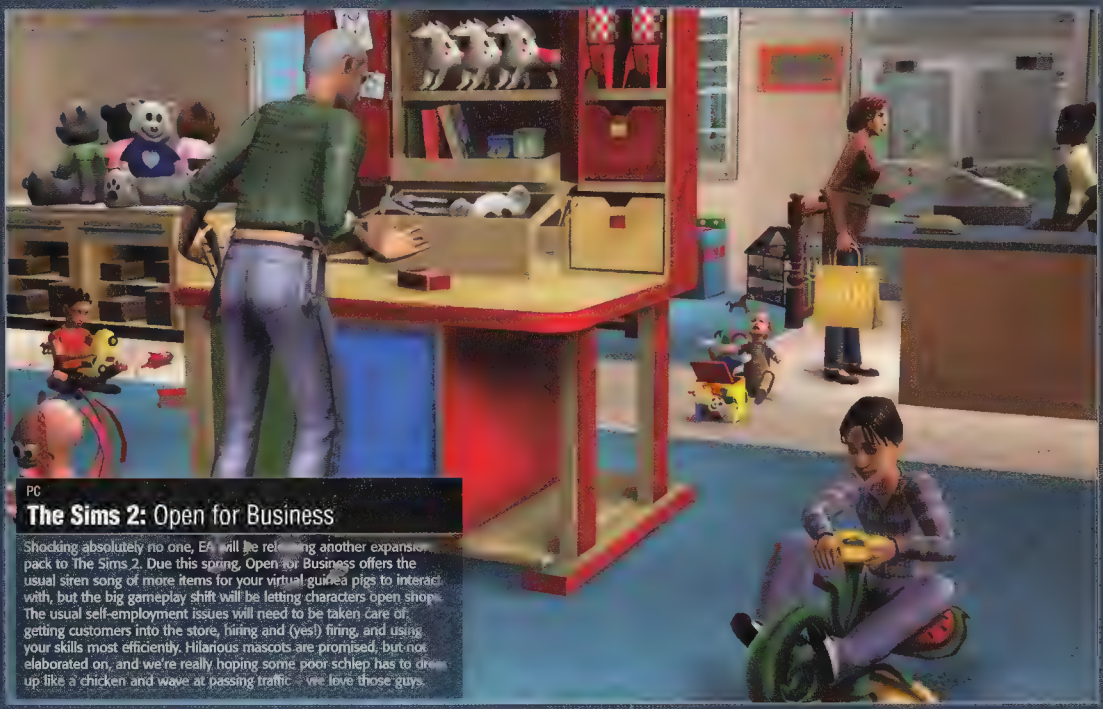
Exit places gamers in the role of Mr. Escape (or "Mr. Esc"), a professional rescuer whose goals in each stage are simple: to lead trapped individuals to safety. In each of the 100 side-scrolling levels, Mr. Escape must find a path to the area's exit, leading out those who he finds along the way. Fires, floods, blackouts, and other hazards complicate matters, and the player must find objects like fire extinguishers for assistance. The people you rescue can also figure into the solution, as you can issue them commands with the analog nub and send them to open switches, crawl through gaps, and the like.

Exit's appeal is fairly simple, but we've gotten our hands on the title, and it's proven to be an addicting brew. With smartly designed levels and puzzles, Exit is perfect for pick up and play enjoyment. The soundtrack and voice work add to the drama, and the art design is especially compelling. Although it looks simple, incredibly fluid animation brings this quirky pop art style to life, making for one of the most individual graphical presentations on the system. With its swanky looks and solid puzzle mechanics, Exit is definitely a welcome addition to the PSP library. As an added bonus, 100 additional stages will be available for download shortly after the game releases, doubling its length. It's the little game that keeps on giving! ■ ■ ■



PHOTOPHILE

Mini Previews With Big Pictures



PC

The Sims 2: Open for Business

Shocking absolutely no one, EA will be releasing another expansion pack to The Sims 2. Due this spring, Open for Business offers the usual siren song of more items for your virtual guinea pigs to interact with, but the big gameplay shift will be letting characters open shops. The usual self-employment issues will need to be taken care of, getting customers into the store, hiring and (yes!) firing, and using your skills most efficiently. Hilarious mascots are promised, but not elaborated on, and we're really hoping some poor schlep has to dress up like a chicken and wave at passing traffic – we love those guys.



XBOX 360 | PS3 | PC

Alan Wake

Now that the next generation of games is officially here, it's time to start looking at some of the mysterious games that will eventually find their way to your shiny new consoles, such as Alan Wake. Although no release date or publisher has been mentioned, developer Remedy plans to bring this free-roaming psychological thriller to Xbox 360, PS3, and PC. Set in the town of Bright Falls, Washington, the game centers around successful horror writer Alan Wake, who has come to the town to visit a sleep clinic after his fiancée mysteriously disappeared. Soon after arriving in town, Alan meets a woman who is the exact double of his missing love, and the town later begins to transform into something out of his nightmares. Inspired by the show *Twin Peaks*, Alan Wake promises to be a very different gaming experience thanks to a cool setting, twisted story, and gameplay that revolves around weakening monsters with light. This is one game that deserves a place in the consciousness of next-gen gamers.



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Arena Football

It's gotta tell you something about Arena Football when ex-model-wearing, leopard-pretty boy Jon Bon Jovi is a league icon and owner. At first glance, you may think you're playing a new version of NFL Street, but Arena Football's got some unique aspects that cater to its own brand of high-flying football. Apart from AFL's own rules (such as allowing only one linebacker to blitz), the game lets you play as a receiver and run your own routes, and features an analog kicking meter and a telemetry system similar to EA's NCAA Football. This lets you look at player fatigue ratings (even during a play), as well as see passing tendencies. EA's Arena Football comes out this February, and it'll be interesting to see if its brand of high-scoring pigskin passing is a whole new way to experience the sport, or just one football game too many.



ARCADE

Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection

[illegible] hoping that American gaming dens aren't far behind. Two new characters and one stage have been added for the high-powered cabinet. Lili is a cute teen whose image belies some serious combat prowess. Dragonov, on the other hand, looks like a bruiser and plays a lot like Bryan Fury. The game's old stages are getting an update and are joined by a dank forest ringed with prowling wolves. More subtle changes continue throughout the stages and characters, making the old fighters worth checking out.



PSP

Pursuit Force

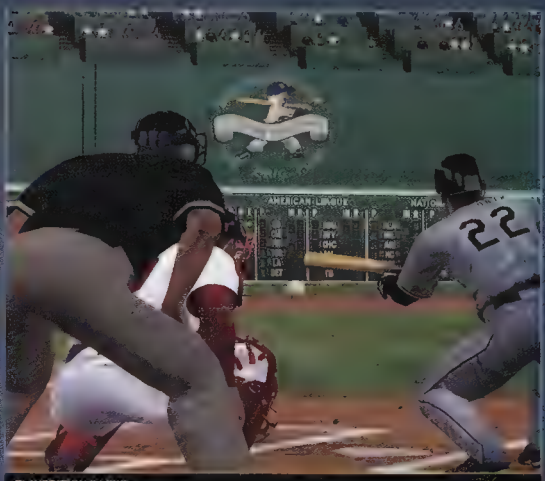
[illegible] remember all of the [illegible] that we used to watch *T.J. Hooker* back in the day. But William Shatner isn't the only one with movies. Sony's PSP title Pursuit Force (coming in early March) is a mix of quick-reflexes driving and gun combat as you subdue fleeing enemies by jumping on top of their car and taking it over. The game also features segments on foot, helicopter chases, and more. It takes you through 30 missions, and includes battles with the bosses from the game's two criminal gangs. The Justice Meter gives you some firepower through slow-mo action sequences and better weapons. Now if only there's a game where we could [illegible] other T.J. Hooker fantasy of getting on [illegible] a young Heather Locklear. Mmm.



GAME BOY ADVANCE

Tales of Phantasia

[illegible] titles have received loving, accurate ports onto newer systems. The GBA has seen a large number of classics reborn in its library, becoming a wonderful way to tour video game history. Nintendo is bringing yet another beloved title to its flagship handheld: Tales of Phantasia, a Namco RPG originally released on the Super Nintendo (and later on the PSone). Tales of Phantasia may not be as well known as some other RPGs out there, but it certainly has its devoted following. Whether you've played through the original release multiple times or never heard of the game, the GBA version of Phantasia is the perfect opportunity to step into the shoes of young swordsman Cress and check out this title's involving story and real-time battle system, and find out what the hype is all about.



PLAYSTATION 2 | PSP

MLB 06: The Show

[illegible] 2006 is the [illegible] baseball [illegible] fact, that it refuses to acknowledge the existence of 2007. Last year's MLB game, 2006. This year's MLB game...2006. As confusing as this is, the two games are easy to differentiate once you see what Sony has added to this latest edition. Silky smooth multi-branch fielding animations, 40-man rosters, player morale in Franchise mode, game time decisions, three-man progressive commentary, and user-controlled sliders are just a few of the key additions. Sony is also including two new modes: Rivalry, which tracks and stores statistics for versus match-ups; and King of the Diamond, a minigame that focuses on the head-to-head battle of batter versus pitcher. As always, this baseball title will release in the spring just before the baseball season gets underway.

REVIEWS

We Play The Crap So You Don't Have To



Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows



Ape Escape 3



Chibi-Robo



Operation Flashpoint Elite



GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH

Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition

When it first released last year, Devil May Cry 3 was a ruthlessly difficult game for hardened demon-hunting veterans. With the release of this special edition, more gamers can now experience what this amazing action title has to offer through new difficulty settings, extra features, and the opportunity to play as Dante's twin brother Vergil. This new character changes the way you think about Devil May Cry's stylish combat, and provides more than enough incentive to take another look at the adventure that returned Dante to grace.

Our crack (or crackhead, we can never decide which) review team rates games in a number of categories to help you sort out the great from the stuff you'll hate. Most games are reviewed by two staff members, and you will find both their opinions on each review. To make things a little easier we have put together some definitions of what the numbers mean, what we look for in a game, and also a cheat sheet so the newbies can understand our advanced video game jargon. It is important to note that the Game of the Month is determined only by the main review score, not an average of the two opinions.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.
5	Passable. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
4	Bad. While some things may work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions to varying degrees or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
1	Gwah! It am hurt me brain. Me stoopid now.

> Concept: What new ideas the game brings to the table and how well old ideas are presented.

> Graphics: How good a game looks, taking into account any flaws such as bad collision or pop-up.

> Sound: Does the game's music and sound effects get you involved or do they make you resolve to always play with the volume down?

> Playability: Basically, the controller to human interface. The less you think about the hunk of plastic in your hands, the better the playability.

> Entertainment: Flat out, just how fun the game is to play. The most important factor in rating a game

> Replay Value

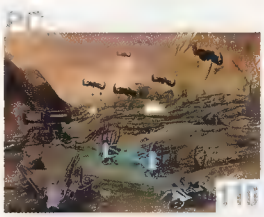
High – You'll still be popping this game in five years from now.

Moderately High – Good for a long while, but the thrills won't last forever.

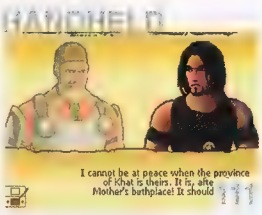
Moderate - Good for a few months or a few times through

Moderately Low – After finishing it, there's not much reason to give it a second go

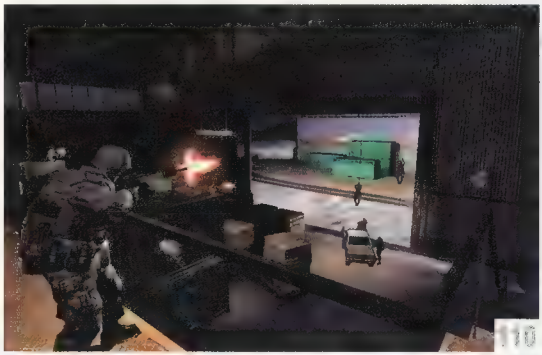
Low – You'll quit playing before you complete the game.



Earth 2160



Battles of Prince of Persia



Battlefield 2: Special Forces

The most strategy-friendly online action game around just got deeper. Special Forces adds a host of new toys to the rich Battlefield 2 mix, and gives players even more tools to devise devious schemes to dispatch the enemy. Some of the greatest map design around helps to make Special Forces a worthy expansion to one of 2005's best PC titles.

REVIEWS INDEX



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theedge

When All Games Aren't Created Equal

This is where GI breaks down multi-platform games. So whenever you see this logo, there is important multi-system information regarding that product.

EARLY CHILDHOOD	Content suitable for persons ages 3 and older	MATURE	Content suitable for persons 17 ages and older
EVERYONE	Content suitable for persons ages 6 and older	ADULTS ONLY	Content suitable only for adults.
EVERYONE 10+	Content suitable for persons ages 10 and older.	RATING PENDING	Product is awaiting final rating
TEEN	Content suitable for persons ages 13 and older		

For our newer readers, here is a glossary of terms and acronyms that commonly appear in the magazine. Video game veterans should move along (these aren't the droids you are looking for).

1080i - A resolution specification used for HDTV. 1080i stands for resolution of 1920x1080 pixels. The "i" means that the video is being interlaced

480p – Progressive scanning, the option ("p"= progressive), creates a picture signal with double the scan lines of a conventional interlaced picture, 480i (i = interlaced), to create a noticeably sharper image. The 480p image offers higher picture resolution and eliminates virtually all motion artifacts in a 640x480 pixel resolution setting

720p – A resolution specification used for HDTV. 720p stands for resolution of 1280x720 pixels. The "p" means that the video is in progressive format

action – A term we use for games like Devil May Cry and Viewtiful Joe

ad hoc – A type of wireless connection that connects you with other players in your immediate vicinity

adventure – A term we use for games like Myst and Escape From Monkey Island

AI – Artificial Intelligence. Usually used to refer to how well the computer reacts to a human opponent

April Fools What people who claimed the PS3 would come out in March will feel like when April rolls around

bloom – An effect that simulates the soft, blurred glow of bright light reflecting off of surfaces

board – A term we use for games like Jeopardy! and Mario Party

cel shading – A technique used to create 3D rendered objects that resemble hand-drawn animation cels

E3 Electronic Entertainment Expo. The world's largest convention for video games

fighting – A term we use for games like Mortal Kombat and Dead or Alive

first-party – A game made by a console manufacturer's internal development teams exclusively for its own system

FMV – Full Motion Video. Usually refers to an animated CG cutscene

FPS – Frames Per Second. How many animation frames happen in one second. Also used to denote First-Person Shooters like Halo, Doom, and Call of Duty

framerate – The frames of animation used to create the illusion of movement

frontend – A game's menus and options

GBA – Game Boy Advance

GC – GameCube

HDTV – High Definition Television

infrastructure A type of wireless connection that uses the Internet to connect with other players over long distances

isometric – Three-quarters top down view, like StarCraft or Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

ISP – Internet Service Provider. The company that provides you with access to the Internet

jaggies – Graphical lines that are jagged when they should be straight

LAN – Local Area Network. Connecting computers or consoles together within a small space to allow communication between them. Provides fast, simultaneous gameplay

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online. Usually applied to role-playing titles, we use this term for games with persistent, multi-user online worlds like EverQuest and World of Warcraft

motion blur – Phantom frames follow an object to give the impression of realistic speed

normal mapping – A graphical technique in which a hi-res skin containing 3D information, revealed by light reflecting off the surface, is wrapped around a low-res model

NPC – Non-Player Character. Those people and creatures you see wandering around in games that are not being controlled by actual humans

particle effects – Things like smoke or sparks created in real-time

platform – A term we use for games like Super Mario and Crash Bandicoot

pop-up – When objects onscreen suddenly appear, typically due to poor draw distance

PS2 Sony PlayStation 2

puzzle – A term we use for games like Tetris and Puyo Pop

racing – A term we use for games like Gran Turismo and Mario Kart

RPG – Role-Playing Game. A game that involves character improvement through collecting and spending points. A term we use for games like Final Fantasy and Xenosaga

shooter – A term we use for games like Ikaruga and Gradius

sports – A term we use for games like Madden NFL

strategy A term we use for games like La Pucelle and Front Mission

third-party – Something made for a console by a company other than the console manufacturer

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 4-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** MIDWAY HOME ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 12 > **ESRB** T



LOWEST COMMON DENOMINATOR

I guess it isn't broken. But Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows passes the threshold of "functional" by minimizing every bullet point on its feature list; dumbing each down to the barest sliver of an idea. The exception is the game's one notable feat – online, cooperative multiplayer. This, I am delighted to say, works swimmingly and lets four friends wade through the rest of the game's mediocrity in a pack, instead of as sad little islands.

Other than that, there are levels with grand variety, multiple difficulty options, character upgrades, and selectable special moves. That sounds like a lot, right? Well, the half dozen stages sure do look different from each other, but each functions in exactly the same truncated and linear way. The game can easily be beaten on the normal difficulty level in under five hours, and adding more players seems to have no effect on the number of enemies or their AI. In addition, after beating it with one character, that fighter's accumulated upgrades make the Impossible difficulty level essentially equal to a new character on Normal, and customizing a character is even less challenging. When a special chest is opened, everyone playing gets an upgrade point that makes your gear just plain better. There is no choice in what way, nor in how it looks – each character has a tree of increasingly hardcore equipment skins that players will rarely see, as the game never affords much of a vantage point on your own fighter. All available special moves will be purchased within three hours and, although I played through it twice, it doesn't appear that more show up anytime.

While the game is breezily enjoyable, like watching *Die Hard* for the eighth time, the pleasure it dumps in front of gamers is composed entirely of nostalgia and the company of good friends. I guess that Seven Sorrows doesn't get in the way of you having a decent time, which if one were being kind, would be a second feat achieved…but just barely.—**LISA**

BOTTOM LINE **6.25**

> **Concept:** Try to revitalize the classic hack n' slash franchise by doing the exactly what the old games did

> **Graphics:** Linear level design doesn't really offer much for looks, although each of the short stages has a different style

> **Sound:** Classic, cheesy voiceover dude is a great touch, but the rest is generic fantasy

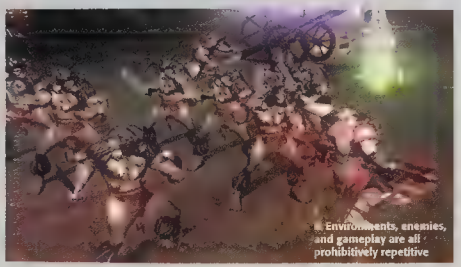
> **Playability:** You hack…you slash. .you do little else

> **Entertainment:** Seven Sorrow's greatest assets are your nostalgia and your friends

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.75

This series is a byword for the brand of mindless co-op action that it started back in the arcades 20 years ago. But you don't have to go back that far to see this game's immediate influences. Seven Sorrows feels like a mediocre action title from five years ago – complete with a bad story, forgettable boss battles and enemies, little character development, and basic action gameplay. To its credit, this title doesn't stand in the way of those who want to get together with some friends and spend a rainy afternoon with a brawler that requires a modicum of teamwork. If that doesn't sound like much fun, remember that you've done stupider things with your friends, like that time you and your buds tried to see who could stuff the most mini marshmallows up their nose —**KATO**



Environments, enemies, and gameplay are all prohibitively repetitive



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

America's Army: Rise of a Soldier

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 16-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE)
> **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** SECRET LEVEL > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 (XBOX), JANUARY 17 (PS2) > **ESRB** T

MAJOR MALFUNCTION

With the Army's new aggressive commercials airing on TV, this game is one advertisement that doesn't work. If anything, it's less an Army recruiting tool and more a deterrent. Hell, maybe you'll even be so dissuaded as to go join the Navy instead. The Village People have always said they are looking for new seamen. As a game, Rise of a Soldier is a poor first-person shooter that is not only behind the times for the genre, but also one that confines players in a way that your normal FPS fan might not like.

Although you learn basic Army tactics such as the importance of maintaining squad groupings and following orders, the title is structured like a normal FPS, where you are more prone to act like a one-man killing machine. However, that's not tolerated in this game, and I understand that. The problem is that the game does not effectively bridge the gap between being an FPS and a strategy game like Full Spectrum Warrior – which follows similar military rules to much-better results. For instance, in an attempt to bind you to your squad, the game sends you from checkpoint to checkpoint via obnoxious icons. These make the game feel like you're collecting coins in an out-of-date platformer. On the FPS side of things, the action simply never feels that exciting as generic situations pop up and you mow down brain-dead enemies.

On a positive note, I do like how the game is structured. You get to try your hand at several roles, whether it's as a rifleman or sniper, and the points you get to pour into your skill set correspond nicely to your growth as a soldier. Despite earning some acclaim for the game's adventures on the PC, America's Army is a title that is not only behind the times, but it's buggy and not very much fun to play. In fact, I'd rather be labeled a traitor and take my chances with a stint in Gitmo Prison than undergo more of this torture.—**KATO**



Baby seal is a dish best served cold

BOTTOM LINE **6.5**

> **Concept:** Step into the boots of various soldier roles in America's Army

> **Graphics:** Like the ham and gravy they serve up in the mess hall, this is a pretty bland concoction

> **Sound:** There is some dialogue here and there, but the sergeant doesn't like a lot of unnecessary chatter in his squad

> **Playability:** Crouch commands can be stupidly unresponsive and the AI isn't great

> **Entertainment:** Full Spectrum Warrior presents military doctrine much, much better

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7.25

Despite the butt metal-filled commercials, a game whose sole goal is to be as close to being in the real U.S. Army isn't quite as fun as a fictionalized action title like Call of Duty. However, I still have to give Rise of a Soldier points for its outstanding realism, which really does lend a certain immediacy to the missions. Also, the single-player campaign's method of rewarding you with skill points for completing objectives and following orders is a nice incentive to do well, rather than just stay alive. Rough edges plague most areas of the game, though Controls can be unresponsive at times, AI tends to be rather lacking, and the occasional bug will force a mission restart. The total lack of player freedom is a drag, too – even if it does accurately portray being in the Army —**ADAM**



PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

Winning Eleven 9

> STYLE 1 TO 8-PLAYER SPORTS (PS2), 1 OR 2-PLAYER (XBOX) (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) **> PUBLISHER** KONAMI **> DEVELOPER** KONAMI **> RELEASE** FEBRUARY 7 **> ESRB** E

ANOTHER YEAR OLDER

This venerable franchise didn't do a whole lot to change itself last year, and despite the addition of online play for Winning Eleven 9, this new title in the series is moving forward at a snail's pace. Make no mistake, however. This game is still the best soccer title out there bar none, delivering gameplay that rivals the fancy footwork and imagination of those who play the sport in real life.

It's easy to point to this game's blasé graphics and see that as an obvious area upon which this game can improve, but one aspect in which it is falling behind in is in player movement. Although you can certainly use the left analog stick to move, it feels a little stiff when you're dribbling. I would love for this series to turn that corner and deliver true analog movement so this game could open up with even more possibilities. WE 9 actually gives you some new trapping options, which can help you shake a marker, but as this series goes on and the list of commands mapped to an already crowded controller grows, I wonder if some of the intuitive play and grace are lost. Speaking of fluidity, the aggression of AI players has been increased, and you'll notice that you can be bumped off the ball more, creating increased play stoppages. These may be realistic, but they cut into play too often. Your guys can also be a little timid in challenging for headers and receiving passes.

Another area that I feel needs an update is the Master League. Although it offers some player progression depth (including some tweaks this year), the format is boringly menu-driven and a bit dry considering how sports games are offering career formats imbued with a little more imagination. All told, Winning Eleven 9 is still a very well-honed title that never fails to get my blood going, but I think a jump to next-gen for the series could be just the boost that this franchise needs.—**KATO**


Ah, a typical day in the world of [illegible] deeply changed when [illegible] turned the ball into a land mine

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> Concept: Online play has been added, but this series has plateaued

> Graphics: It's high time for this game to update its bland graphics or go to next-gen

> Sound: Speaking of things that don't change, the commentary and menu music are the same as ever

> Playability: A few new controls are added to the already mind-boggling possibilities

> Entertainment: Still the best soccer game out there for any system, but this franchise is starting to coast

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.5

There's a growing split occurring in the two major franchises of video game soccer. FIFA continues to look and sound better, while simultaneously growing more player friendly. Meanwhile, Winning Eleven undoubtedly brings players the more authentic experience, and each year offers more complicated and precise controls. It's a trend that is abundantly clear in both games this year, and your choice of which to play should be governed by those factors. The deep and involving play of Winning Eleven 9 shows off some great animations and the same stellar ball control of earlier versions, but overall visuals and the commentator clips are starting to feel ever so slightly behind the times. Whether you throw your money to Konami or EA at this point is really a matter of personal preference.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2 | GAMECUBE

Mega Man X Collection

> STYLE 1-PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** CAPCOM **> DEVELOPER** CAPCOM **> RELEASE** JANUARY 10 **> ESRB** E

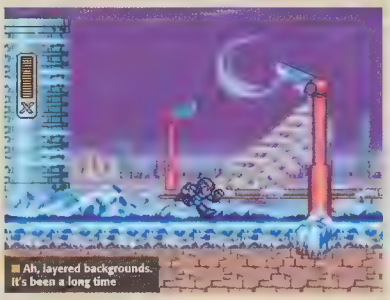

Good luck finding actual SNES carts for X2 or X3 – this is easily your best bet

A ROBOT FOR EVERY OCCASION

I learned two things while playing Mega Man X Collection. First, I still totally rock at hunting Mavericks with either X or Zero. Second, nobody can port an old franchise to new hardware like Capcom. On either PS2 or 'Cube, this is literally a perfect translation of the first six Mega Man X titles (and Mega Man Battle & Chase, which nobody cares about).

But for the controller in my hand (and, thankfully, a save feature on the older games that didn't have one) I could've sworn I was playing the originals – and believe me, I played those originals a lot. And, unlike so many early games, these are still pretty fun. Anyone who hasn't had a chance to check out these classics would be well served by giving them a whirl. The combination of light-running-paced platforming, cool boss fights, and the various upgrade systems makes for a great time.

Of course, the problems of the franchise are all the more apparent with the intervening years of game design evolution. Some levels feature tasks that are nearly impossible to pull off without a specific upgrade, and as always, the boss fights are trivialized if you have the weapon that he's weak against. Furthermore, the level of quality is wildly erratic throughout the whole series. X5 and X6 are prime examples – some levels and bosses are flat-out brilliant, while others are needlessly frustrating and stupid. If you can put up with a few outdated clichés and the occasional irritation, though, this collection has a lot of prime gaming packed onto the disc.—**ADAM**


Ah, layered backgrounds. It's been a long time

BOTTOM LINE 8

> Concept: Cram all six Mega Man X titles from the SNES and PSone eras onto a new, shiny disc

> Graphics: Actually, old 2D visuals hold up surprisingly well – frankly, it's probably a good thing that we can't see Split Mushroom in greater detail

> Sound: As always, Mega Man's tunes run the gamut from awesome to hilariously corny

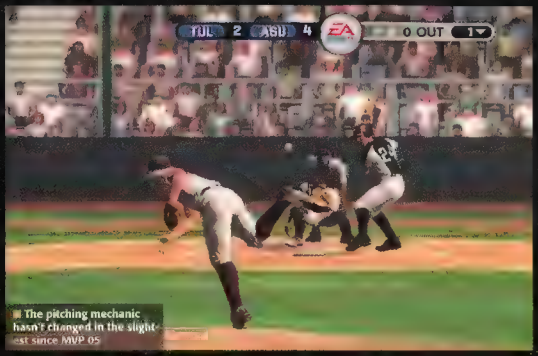
> Playability: Yep, the GameCube's d-pad still bites. Other than that, everything works perfectly

> Entertainment: Even with all of its ups and downs, the X series was undeniably one of the better side-scrolling action franchises of its day. Getting frame-perfect conversions of the first six games on a single disc is a hell of a deal

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.25

I'm pretty sure that the Mega Man X games were designed from the ground up to be ego checks for arrogant gamers. Where the challenge of one of them is mammoth, the beating down you will take from half a dozen is downright painful. Luckily, some patient pattern memorization is all it takes to break through the challenge and discover the phenomenal games underneath. This collection has all the masochistic fan needs, even if the lack of genuinely interesting extras doesn't offer everything you want. Don't be scared away by the difficulty – up-and-coming gamers should consider these a rite of passage.—**MILLER**



The pitching mechanic hasn't changed in the slightest since MVP 05

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

MVP 06 NCAA Baseball

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER SPORTS (2-PLAYER VIA PS2 ONLINE OR XBOX LIVE) > **PUBLISHER** EA SPORTS
> **DEVELOPER** EA CANADA > **RELEASE** JANUARY 18 > **ESRB** E

FROM THE SHOW TO OMAHA

There are two telltale signs that are associated with college baseball: the reverberating 'ping' of aluminum, and the "Why am I clapping? I just came here to drink" enthusiasm of those in attendance. While it seems odd that EA Sports would settle for the third best that baseball has to offer, I applaud the company's decision to give this sport a chance.

Outside of the metal bat, EA's recreation of college baseball really doesn't have a unique identity. The 128 universities that are included in the game are faceless. The authentic fight songs and stadiums that bring out the college atmosphere are noticeably absent. Moreover, little attention is drawn to the big rivalry games. Dynasty mode is just as lifeless as this game's presentation.

The developer did, however, make an attempt to redefine how video game baseball is played. Much like the successful analog swing mechanic in Tiger Woods, almost every action in the game – be it taking a cut, or tossing the ball in field – is now analog based. The analog swing requires a greater level of skill and determination, producing a great sense of satisfaction when a ball is hit well. On the other hand, throwing doesn't feel natural. Under- and overthrowing are common mistakes given how sensitive this mechanic is. Since this stick also handles the functionality for diving and jumping, motioning to throw before your fielder handles the ball can turn a sure out into an extra-base error.

At the end of the day, this game did little to lure me into the college fold. It falls more into category of a generic baseball game than it does a part of EA's illustrious college series.—**REINER**

BOTTOM LINE **7**

> **Concept:** Without school spirit, this first-ever college baseball game is about as boring as a kegger at Lambda Lambda Lambda

> **Graphics:** Decent player models, but authentic stadiums are lacking. The game also seems to show off that its players can wear sunglasses at every given opportunity

> **Sound:** Mike Patrick once again proves to be one of the smartest men in America. The 'ping' of the bat is also nicely captured

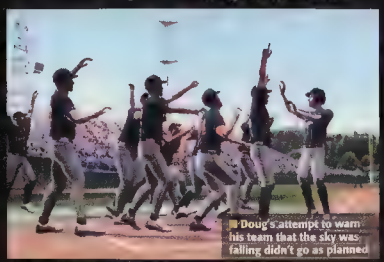
> **Playability:** The new analog swing has a nice feel to it, but analog throwing couldn't be more disastrous

> **Entertainment:** Lacks the content that will really get you excited about college ball

> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 7.5

This game is similar to last year's MVP, except the pro players have been replaced by no-name college kids with less skill. That means more errors and pitchers with worse control problems than a Depends convention. The series' new analog hitting and throwing are good additions, and are worth checking out. I really like the batting, but throwing with the analog stick can cause some problems as you throw to the wrong base or the game confuses your defensive dive command in the infield for a throw to first. Despite these new features, this game is starting to show its age, as players still have problems changing directions and animations can rule your actions more than your controller does.—**KATO**


Doug's attempt to warn his team that the sky was falling didn't go as planned

PLAYSTATION 2 | XBOX

50 Cent: Bulletproof

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** VIVENDI UNIVERSAL > **DEVELOPER** GENUINE GAMES
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 18 > **ESRB** M

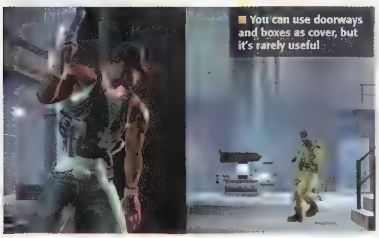

You can purchase new holds and finishing moves

JUST ANOTHER WANKSTA

Damn the haters, I like 50 Cent. Sure, he's not as "lyrical" as the Internet's underground nerd-rap icons, but I'll take his louche, lazy charm and mean wit over some liberal arts major thesaurus abuser any day of the week. Plus, arguing with the sleek, air-conditioned beats of "In Da Club" and "Stunt 101" is like trying to tell Mount Rushmore it's not impressive – they're just awesome and huge, and that's a fact. Sure, he's pretty much got nothing to say, but he makes nothing sound cool.

If only his game were as flawless. Sometimes, nothing is just nothing. All style and no substance can only go so far, and developer Genuine Games has failed to deliver a game that is able to stand on its own two feet. For casual or non-fans of 50 Cent, there's no element of this game that you haven't played in better form dozens of times before. It's essentially a mix of third-person gunners like Max Payne or Dead to Rights – each level consists of little more than running down corridors and rooms, shooting down every enemy in sight, and then going through the door or passage to the next section. Compounding the problem is the fact that the basic combat just isn't very fun. Whether the aim assist is on or off, targeting is wretched; your reticle moves so terribly slowly that it's almost impossible to keep a bead on the surprisingly swift and canny enemies. If your level designs are nothing more than 3D versions of Hogan's Alley, you better make damn sure that the actual shooting is enjoyable to the player. Bulletproof doesn't, and fails as a result.

However, if you think of this as a soundtrack and video collection with a bonus game attached to it, it's not a bad buy for fans. There are a ton of great tracks by all the members of G-Unit and over a dozen music videos. It's really impressive. Whether you can stand playing the game long enough to unlock them all, well, that's another question altogether.—**MATT**


You can use doorways and boxes as cover, but it's rarely useful

BOTTOM LINE **6**

> **Concept:** A banal shoot 'em up starring the world's most popular rapper

> **Graphics:** While the environments are bland, the character models and cutscenes are well done

> **Sound:** A treasure trove for fans, featuring big hits by 50 and the whole of G-Unit, plus a wealth of new exclusive tracks and beats by Sha Money XL

> **Playability:** The Max Payne control scheme goes horribly awry with Bulletproof's poor targeting and camera

> **Entertainment:** Unless you live for everything 50 Cent does, this game will prove unsatisfying

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 5

All forthcoming releases need to adopt Bulletproof's concept of stealing wallets to unlock bonus material. Sack a quarterback in Madden. Steal his wallet. Slay a dragon in Final Fantasy. Swipe its Visa. As strange of a sensation as it is to plunge your hands into the blood-soaked pockets of your attackers, this game gives you good reason to loot everyone that raises a gun against you. The cash that you acquire can be used to purchase an incredibly generous amount of bonus tracks and videos from both 50 Cent and G-Unit. The bad news is that you actually have to play this bottom-of-the-barrel shooter to get them. Sluggish gunplay coupled with level designs that are assuredly in the running for the most generic of this generation make you want to sell this game to a friend for 50 cents within minutes of picking up the controller.—**REINER**



GAME INFORMER'S TOP 50 SWEEPSTAKES

1. ENTRY: One (1) entry per person, per day. Sweepstakes begins 12:00 AM Central Time (CT) December 21, 2005 and ends 11:59 PM CT March 13, 2006 ("Sweepstakes Period"). To enter this sweepstakes, go to www.gameinformer.com and follow the instructions posted there. By submitting your entry, you agree to be bound by these official rules and the decisions of the sponsor, which are final. Game Informer magazine (the "Sponsor") are not responsible for lost, late, incomplete or misdirected entries. 2. PRIZE: One (1) grand prize winner will receive a single copy of every game featured in Game Informer's Top 50 games of 2005 (approximate retail value $2,499.50). Sponsor reserves the right to substitute prize of equal or greater value if prize is unavailable. Prizes are non-transferable and no substitutions allowed. 3. WINNER: Winner will be determined by random drawings of all valid entries. Drawing will be held on or about April 1, 2006. Winner will be notified by email. Please allow six to eight weeks for delivery of prizes. 4. ODDS OF WINNING: The odds of winning depend on number of valid entries received. 5. ELIGIBILITY: Promotion open to residents of United States only. Returns of any prize/prize notification as undeliverable will result in disqualification and an alternate winner will be selected. Winner may be required to sign an affidavit of eligibility/release of liability/prize acceptance within 14 days of receipt or forfeit prize. If the winner is a minor, then prize may be awarded to winner's parent or legal guardian. By acceptance of prize, winners agree to the use of their name and/or likeness for purposes of advertising, trade, or promotion without further compensation, unless prohibited by law. Employees of the Sponsor, Game Informer Magazine, and their parent and affiliated companies and their families are not eligible. Neither the Sponsor nor its affiliates, subsidiaries, division or related companies are responsible for any typographical or other errors in the printing of the offer, administration of the promotion or in the announcement of the prize. VOID WHERE PROHIBITED. Sweepstakes and void where prohibited or restricted by law. Entries will only be accepted by those who are 13 years of age or older. Void where prohibited or restricted by law.



The two brothers only fight each other if you play as Dante. Otherwise it's a clone battle



These swords take the place of firearms for Vergil

UNLIMITED ENABLED

PLAYSTATION 2

Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** CAPCOM > **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM > **RELEASE** JANUARY 26 > **ESRB** M

GAME INFORMER GAME OF THE MONTH



VERGIL'S ODYSSEY

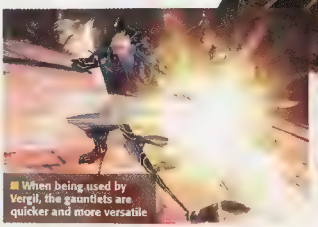
The mark of a great last boss is when players can look at their maxed-out, unstoppable juggernaut of a hero, then glance at the final foe and still wish that they could switch places. Of course, Dante is no slouch, but the confrontation with his katana-wielding brother Vergil at the end of DMC 3 is the only time he has ever paled in comparison to an opponent. Now, with the release of this special edition, Dante's demonic kin is no longer confined to pivotal boss battles; he's unleashed as a fully playable character, and brings a whole new dimension to this already amazing game.

Far more than a new skin for the same action, playing as Vergil drastically alters the way you approach Devil May Cry. While many of the basic commands remain the same, you'll need to re-calibrate your style of play to adjust to Vergil's array of unique attacks. For instance, guns are out of the picture now. He has phantom swords for ranged attacks, but the real focus is on mobility and fancy swordsmanship. He uses the Darkslayer style (as opposed to the five styles at Dante's disposal), which allows him to instantly teleport to enemies to keep the carnage flowing. While this makes him slightly less versatile than Dante, he gains some ground by having all three of his weapons (katana, gauntlets, and dual blades) available to him at all times.

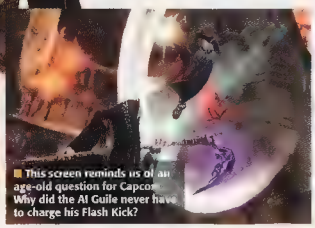
"Playing as Vergil drastically alters the way you approach Devil May Cry"

The only twinge of disappointment you'll feel as you mow through the hordes of demons is when you realize that barely any new material was added to accommodate Vergil. Apart from a new prologue, none of the cutscenes are shown, and Dante isn't even substituted in during the brothers' key battles – it's just Vergil versus Vergil. Lastly, to even access this fantastic new character, you need to either beat the special edition (which is a more realistic goal thanks to retooled difficulty levels) or have clear data from the original DMC 3 release. But it's worth it.

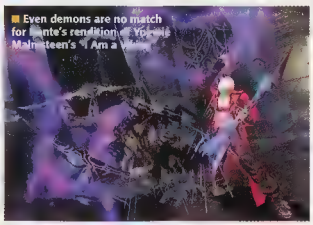
As someone who has been burned by several "special editions" that don't offer anything special (why is there a director's cut of *Elektra*?), I love how this release made me want to play through the entire game all over again. A turbo option, the Blood Palace challenge, and a series of boss fights against Jester round out an array of great new additions. Plus, if you missed the train the first time around, this edition's $20 price point means that it's the perfect opportunity to hitch a ride to Hell and back.—**JOE**



When being used by Vergil, the gauntlets are quicker and more versatile



This screen reminds us of an age-old question for Capcom: Why did the AI Guile never have to charge his Flash Kick?



Even demons are no match for Dante's rendition of Yolanda Molnsteen's "I Am a Woman"

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** The sons of Sparda cross blades again in a fully-loaded special edition

> **Graphics:** Jester's added battle effects are hilarious, whether he's spanking himself or bleeding confetti

> **Sound:** Vergil doesn't say much, which is an improvement over Dante's lame party-dudery

> **Playability:** The new moves are great, but the problematic camera angles are still a persistent problem

> **Entertainment:** A more manageable difficulty means that more people can enjoy the stylish combat, but the hardcore set will still find near-impossible challenges

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 9

Someone at Capcom must have stumbled upon Peter Jackson's secret notes for "ways to bankrupt nerds." Not only does my DVD collection consist of two different versions of each *The Lord of the Rings* film, I've just recently added a second copy of Resident Evil 4 to my video game library. Now, I find myself counting the days until I can purchase a second copy of Devil May Cry 3. The inclusion of Dante's twin brother Vergil as a playable character is reason enough for fans to revisit this amazing adventure. From kicking his brother's ass to just kicking ass period, Vergil is a proficient killing machine that brings an exciting new style to the fray. People who struggled with DMC 3's grueling difficulty level will also get something out of this release. The new Gold Orb continue system and adjusted difficulty levels greatly dull this game's razor-sharp edge. Regardless of how you approach this release, you gotta play it.—**REINER**



PLAYSTATION 2

Wild Arms 4

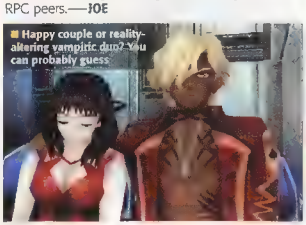
> STYLE 1 PLAYER ROLE-PLAYING GAME **> PUBLISHER** XSEED GAMES **> DEVELOPER** MEDIA VISION **> RELEASE** JANUARY 10 **> ESRB** T

COME BACK, SHANE!

Whether you call them drifters, dream chasers, or treasure hunters, anyone who has played an RPG in the last 10 years is familiar with the notion of the wandering warrior-for-hire. The Wild Arms series has made excellent use of this motif in the past, and the fourth installment is no exception. However, even with this and other familiar themes in place, Wild Arms 4 cuts ties with many old traditions – and still ends up where it started.

It may upset die-hard fans, but I rejoiced to see that the insipid overworld search feature has been axed, and the random battle evasion has been replaced with an entirely new mechanic. The only thing I was sorry to see go was the western setting. The world of Filgaia definitely has a more modern and sci-fi look this time around; even though you won't see any lonesome cowboys, there are still plenty of great characters that drive the story forward. The heroes are all likeable (though predictable), and the outlandish cast of villains is reminiscent of Metal Gear Solid's Foxhound unit; each foe has a superhuman ability that your party must confront in combat.

Unfortunately, these fights (like every battle in Wild Arms 4) fall short of their potential. Just because the battles take place on a hexagonal grid doesn't automatically make them strategic. Wild Arms 4 does have some cool buff and debuff options, but the system isn't very deep or intricate and it relies too heavily on chance. It is functional, since it allows you to kill a bunch of monsters, but it never really succeeds at being interesting. In fact, this is pretty much par for the Wild Arms 4 course, as it consistently provides innovations for the series but nothing to distinguish it among its other RPG peers.—**JOE**



Happy couple or reality-altering vampiric duo? You can probably guess

BOTTOM LINE 7.5

> Concept: Ditch the things that have been holding back Wild Arms while fastening some new shackles

> Graphics: The characters look alright, but the environments have a tragic case of the uglies

> Sound: There isn't much spoken dialogue, but since the voice actors are terribly annoying, that's probably for the best

> Playability: A good variety of styles, with side-scrolling and puzzles mixed in with standard exploration

> Entertainment: It's a pretty rewarding game if you can bully through the first several hours

> Replay Value: Moderate

Second Opinion 7.5

After the recent debacle that was Alter Code F, it would be easy for fans of Wild Arms to discount this newest entry entirely. But, rest assured, Wild Arms 4 is a step in the right direction for the franchise, and a pretty compelling RPG to boot. First glance certainly isn't going to attract any new converts, as the tech is decidedly behind the times. Luckily, the story, characters, and hex-based strategy-lite battle system are all reasonably cool. Dialogue and plotline are heavily anime infused, feeling chuckle and silly at one moment, then grim and bizarre the next. Simple puzzles, consistent customization options, and even some brief side-scrolling sections break up the norm, and I was surprised how much I liked the brief shifts out of normal genre conventions. It's hard for me to see this appealing to a broad variety of players, but RPG faithful could do a lot worse than taking a look.—**MILLER**

PLAYSTATION 2

Ape Escape 3

> STYLE 1 PLAYER ACTION **> PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA **> DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN **> RELEASE** JANUARY 17 **> ESRB** E



NO MORE MONKEY BUSINESS

In a way, Ape Escape 3 seems like an apology from Sony. "We're sorry that the last game was so bad that we refused to publish it in America. We're sorry that we thought that this series was better suited for Mario Party-like minigames. We're sorry that the most fun you've had from this franchise recently was in Metal Gear Solid 3. Please accept this game as our sincerest apology." For all intents and purposes, this is Ape Escape 2. This is the sequel that people have been impatiently swinging from the trees for since the original game released in 1999.

As it should be, Ape Escape 3 is all about hunting and capturing…er… violently capturing…those elusive simians. This time around, however, smacking an ape in the face with the stunclub will most likely just agitate them. These little flea-eaters will get so worked up that they might just steal your stunclub or net. In a twist, if they can get the netting on you, you'll warp back to the hub world – which means that you have to work your way through the entire level again. One of my most embarassing moments as a gamer is getting bested by an ape that is wearing a helmet, or worse, pink bunny ears.

Of course, you can always use a different weapon, like the slingshot, to give you an edge. If that doesn't work, Sony has granted players the ability to transform. By no means will you pack as much firepower as Optimus Prime, but you will be able to call upon the six-shooters of a cowboy, the steel of a knight, the acrobatics of a ninja, and even the dancing prowess of a genie (apparently they like to get down). To counter your new found might, the apes also possess different powers, which usually tie into the hilarious and amazingly crafted movie-themed stages. In a level inspired by *Star Wars*, you'll run into primates wielding laser guns, and even a little bugger that is wearing a black helmet and cape.

As you can probably gather, this game is downright hilarious, rarely offering a moment where you won't have a smile on your face. It's a spirited throwback to the glory days of platformers, a time where this genre could just be wacky and fun, and didn't need troubled protagonists and guns. Now we just need Sony to bring us another Tomba.—**REINER**



If you can beat this minigame, you'll be treated to a scene featuring Snake



The ability to transform offers great new outlets for humor

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

> Concept: A true successor to the original Ape Escape that rekindles the classic gameplay within a hilarious new adventure

> Graphics: Lacking in the little details, but wonderfully colorful and loaded with hilarious ape designs

> Sound: Saturday morning cartoon dialogue with a festive and memorable score

> Playability: The intelligence of the apes has improved greatly. The ability to transform adds much-needed layers to the combat

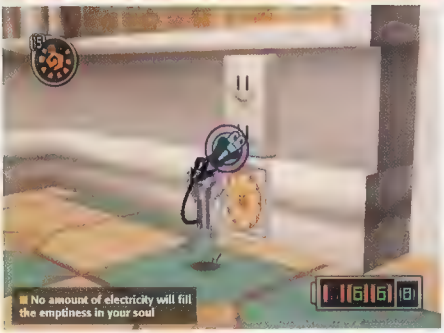
> Entertainment: Roughly 12 hours in length and loaded with great unlockables such as a spoof on Metal Gear Solid 3

> Replay Value: Moderately High

Second Opinion 8.75

After a half-hearted sequel (Ape Escape 2), a half-baked "party" game (Ape Escape: Pumped and Primed), and a half-assed PSP port (Ape Escape: On the Loose), I'd begun to fear that one of my favorite games of all time would never have a worthy successor. Thank God for Ape Escape 3. With improved visuals, great level designs, and a new Morph system that helps freshen up the already-brilliant all-analog control scheme, this game defines everything that's great about old-school 3D platforming. If you've never played the PSone original, consider this mandatory. It's got great gameplay in spades, and a wacky sense of humor that will well serve fans of games like Katamari Damacy.—**MATT**





GAMECUBE

Chibi-Robo

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ADVENTURE > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** SKIP
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 6 > **ESRB** E

WANT TO PLAY A MEAN JOKE ON YOUR KIDS? BUY THEM THIS GAME!

I imagine that a lot of young gamers out there have to do chores like picking up garbage and cleaning floors before they can play any games. How many of those kids are going to rush through those chores to excitedly fire up a game about picking up garbage and washing floors? Make no mistake, that is exactly what Chibi-Robo is: a game about cleaning up after a family of lazy, messy people. Get ready for a career in the service industry, kids!

Sure, the Chibi-Robo character is cute and the premise is quirky, but being cute and quirky isn't the same as being fun, and let's be absolutely clear about one thing: this game is not a damn bit of fun. It becomes mildly bearable later in the game, when the focus shifts slightly from cleaning to helping Chibi's family, the Sandersons, with their problems, but you have to suffer through many hours of tedious busywork to get to that point. The fact that you're constantly recharging Chibi and returning to his "Chibi-House" every five minutes doesn't help anything either. Travelling across the Sanderson household eats up half your day, leaving you mere minutes to explore the further-out reaches of the house.

You can find some items that extend the length of the day, but the longer I spent in the Sanderson house, the less appealing I found it. Despite its look, Chibi-Robo is not a platformer, but more of a 3D adventure game comprised entirely of fetch-quests and repetitive menial labor. Navigating stacks of books to retrieve Frog Rings for an emotionally-stunted eight-year old (with stops to pick up candy wrappers) may sound like fun to some people, but certainly not to me.

I'm fully aware that my thoughts on this game are going to earn me a ton of angry hate mail from people who claim that I just don't get this title's true appeal. Well, I have a message for them: Look beyond the "cute and quirky" facade of this game to see it for what it truly is – a dreary, joyless piece of junk that shamelessly tries to get kids to believe that cleaning is fun.—**JEREMY**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> **Concept:** Pick up lazy people's crap and scrub stains in the carpet! It's like Cinderella the game, except nothing good ever happens

> **Graphics:** Some might call them "cute" and "funny." I call them "ugly" and "dated"

> **Sound:** Garbled mumbling passes as speech, and the music is barely noticeable

> **Playability:** Can you press the big green button? You're covered

> **Entertainment:** Things that aren't fun in real life aren't fun in games either, no matter how "unique" it is

> **Replay Value:** Low

Second Opinion 6

There's a charm in Chibi-Robo's repetition and a distinct feeling of usefulness as you guide the wee robot around the floor, picking up trash. Then again, its self-destructive camera and monotonous gameplay flatten brain activity like a swift blow to the head. That's not even bringing up the disturbing family dynamic of mute child, critical mother, and irresponsible father. While the gameplay is for young 'uns, the characters are begging for an after school special. The game does have whimsy in a firm chokehold, but it does not have quality in a similar grip, so don't mistake quirky for fun.—**LISA**





UNLIMITED ENABLED

XBOX

Operation Flashpoint Elite

> STYLE 1 PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 32-PLAYER VIA XBOX LIVE OR UP TO 14-PLAYER VIA SYSTEM LINK) **> PUBLISHER** CODEMASTERS **> DEVELOPER** BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE **> RELEASE** NOVEMBER 8 **> ESRB** T

OPERATION EMBARRASSMENT

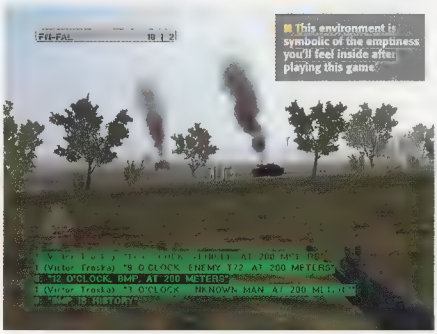
Trashtalking Operation Flashpoint Elite is a lot like scolding a puppy that's just taken a dump on the floor. It feels bad, but it simply needs to be done. This PC port means well and tries to do something different, but ends up looking like a hopeless kid with a wet spot on his pants compared to the more polished shooters on the Xbox.

Collecting two Operation Flashpoint PC releases into one Xbox package, Elite's defining characteristic is that it's "realistic." In other words, it's really boring.



Beautiful, isn't it? The correct answer is no.

A typical mission involves a long ride in a truck listening to annoying squadmates, followed by five minutes of shooting guys who die with one shot, then waiting for the truck to return to pick you up. Let me tell you, the excitement is palpable. Even if the missions weren't as boring as waiting in the dentist's office, the pitiful presentation is unmistakable. Usually, environments this muddy and bland are limited to kindergartners' fingerpaintings. The animations are hilariously stiff, and much of the voice work is culled from a pool of words, rather than fully-recorded lines. The result is robotic soldiers who painfully sputter through lines like "Everyone...move...to... objective...now!" It's like taking a tour of the military hosted by decommissioned Chuck E. Cheese animatronics.



This environment is symbolic of the emptiness you'll feel inside after playing this game.

Although nearly every aspect of Elite simply fails to impress, there's a lot of content included on this disc. Aside from the single-player experience, there is a rudimentary level editor and robust System Link and Xbox live support, although the sluggish gameplay is even less impressive online. It's a pretty loaded disc, but how much do you want to eat at a buffet where everything tastes like crap?—**JEREMY**

BOTTOM LINE 5

> Concept: The PC military shooter series is ported to Xbox, since there's such a shortage of that type of game on the system

> Graphics: Fugly!

> Sound: The cut-and-paste dialogue is hilarious. Who knew the U.S. military was made up of robots?

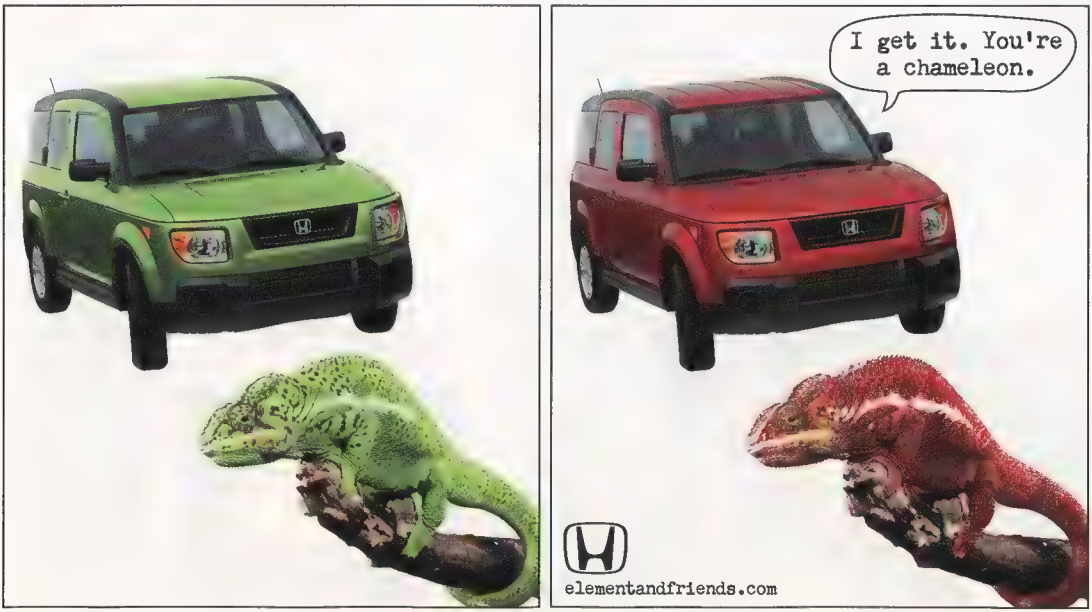
> Playability: The choppy movement and aim adjustment make for a gameplay experience that constantly feels a little off

> Entertainment: Sluggish, ugly and boring, just like that creepy uncle that you go out of your way to avoid hugging at Christmas

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 3.25

It's hard to articulate in mere words my total disdain for this game. Negative metaphors would fail to convey the stupidity of the buggy AI. Harsh and sarcastic jibes would do little to explain the foggy backgrounds and jerky animations that infect the game. Flippant dismissal is perhaps the closest tone I'd like to shoot for – a style that I hope is enough to dissuade both casual gamers and fans of the original PC title from what I found to be one of the ugliest and most broken games in several years. What might once have been a strong PC title is now completely out of date. Stay away—**MILLER**



EX-P model shown. © 2005 American Honda Motor Co., Inc.

PC

Battlefield 2: Special Forces

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (UP TO 64-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** DIGITAL ILLUSIONS CE > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 22 > **ESRB** T

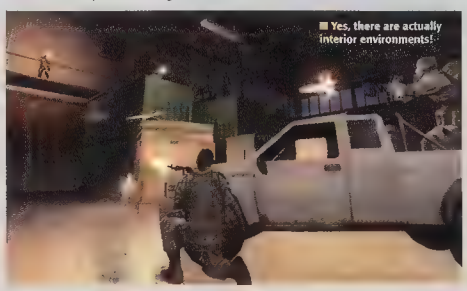

Ziplines dramatically increase certain soldiers' mobility

WAR SQUARED

You know, I play an awful lot of online first-person shooters. Pretty much every single one that comes out. And still, months after Battlefield 2 came out, it easily retains its king of the hill status. Nothing else can touch the intensity of a good Battlefield 2 server, and that's a simple fact. This expansion may seem to be a bit light on the content – there are only a handful of new maps and a few additional items and vehicles – but once you start to explore the ways in which the new options can change the flow of a map, it becomes apparent that Special Forces makes Battlefield 2 a whole new game.

Just like the base game, this expansion sacrifices map quantity for quality. Every single level is chock-full of sniping points, hiding spots, big open stretches where vehicles rule, and everything else you could want. Even though there aren't that many of them, truly learning Special Forces' maps will take a long, long time. However, you can still contribute to your team's success on your first tour of duty, due to the game's various ways of letting you know where you're needed. If you are lucky enough to get on a team that actually uses that built-in organizational features, even better – your commander can send your squad orders to make sure you're attending to urgent business.

The new tools of the various trades in Special Forces, primarily the grappling hook, zipline, and gas and flashbang grenades, add a surprising amount of depth to the game. True, as a green player you may not use them until getting a few dozen hours of play under your belt. But when you're trying out new strategies and new ways to assault the enemy, having these further options is a godsend. Of course, veterans will be able to jump right in and start augmenting their tactics right away. And again, when you start really digging in and exploring the possible strategies, you'll realize exactly how brilliant of an expansion this is. The hottest online shooter is now better than ever. Do yourself a favor and experience it firsthand.—**ADAM**


Yes, there are actually interior environments!

BOTTOM LINE 9

> **Concept:** Give veteran Battlefield 2 players more options to build crazy strategies around

> **Graphics:** If you've got the machine to run it, you're in for a treat

> **Sound:** When the map is this open, the fantastic positional audio really makes a difference

> **Playability:** Driving vehicles, particularly aircraft, still sucks. Will somebody figure out a decent control scheme for this already?

> **Entertainment:** Battlefield didn't make shooting other players fun – but it takes it to the next level

> **Replay Value:** High

Second Opinion 8.5

Special Forces delivers exactly what fans of the series want – new maps, new toys, and new forms of transportation, including a grappling hook and zipline. As you may have guessed, almost all these things are great additions to an already fantastic multiplayer game. Unfortunately, this expansion has a rushed feel to it overall, as it isn't quite as balanced or bug-free as it should have been out of the gate. But my major hang up with the series is still the matching service. EA should really invest in creating its own, as its current service is often frustrating. Sometimes finding a great game is easy, other times you end up clicking through a sea of servers just looking for an interesting match. Problems aside, I still can't stop playing.—**ANDY**


The [illegible] may look [illegible] good, but it need a pretty beastly rig to run it

PC

Earth 2160

> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER STRATEGY (UP TO 8-PLAYER VIA INTERNET OR LAN) > **PUBLISHER** MIDWAY
> **DEVELOPER** REALITY PUMP STUDIOS > **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 15 > **ESRB** T

I GOT YOUR RTS RIGHT HERE

Earth 2160 is, quite simply, as average as average gets. Its frustrations are mostly balanced out by its triumphs, and as a whole it marches across the finish line in acceptable form. Even on a bad day, though, you can't deny that fighting sci-fi battles with enormous armies is entertaining.

On paper, Earth 2160 sounds fantastic. Four diverse factions, hours upon hours of single-player, deep tech trees, and a unit creator are all great features. Base-building and economy are done in an easy-to-use, unique way that will hopefully show up in the genre again. However, once you get down to actually taking those armies into battle, the mediocre execution really takes a toll on the game's enjoyment factor.

Units are a pain to control and the camera requires constant tweaking, which makes any sort of meaningful micromanagement nearly impossible – more often than not, I was reduced to merely sending in the troops and crossing my fingers. Also, the balancing seems too heavily reliant on countering. If you don't have a whole bunch of siege units, for instance, forget about assaulting any emplaced defenses. It's not good when the outcome of battle rests solely on how your selection of troops compares to the enemy's, with little or no consideration given to tactics.

Those of you who enjoy an old-fashioned romp of creating big stompy war machines to crush the opposition, and are willing to overlook some faults, will have a perfectly fine time here. If you're a genre dabbler, there are a good dozen or so similar games released over the last several years that deserve your attention far more than this entirely average title.—**ADAM**


This big ol' mess of troops is typical for any conflict

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Get ready for this, it might blow you away: Real-time strategy…in space!

> **Graphics:** If it weren't for the hideously drab environments, this would be a fine-looking game

> **Sound:** It's been a long time since I've hated a character solely for his voice. I could've waited a bit longer

> **Playability:** Brilliant in some ways (economy and base-building), horrid in others (everything else)

> **Entertainment:** There are not a few irritations and rough spots, but building armies and blowing up aliens is intrinsically fun

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 7

Sometimes ambition can be a bad thing. Earth 2160 is best played via Skirmish mode or multiplayer, where you can concentrate on the game's strength – its research possibilities. Otherwise the Campaign mode annoys you with its ticky-tack missions, bad story, and poor voice-acting. This game lacks a polish that makes pathfinding, target acquisition, and base planning problematic. The result is a title that appeals to only those who are enamored with unit building above all else. Although some might like the time and care needed to conjure the brute force necessary to complete your average objective, I was more impatient. This war of attrition is one that I tired of before long.—**KATO**



NINTENDO DS

Battles of Prince of Persia

> **STYLE** 1 OR 2-PLAYER STRATEGY (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 6 > **ESRB** E 10+

STRATEGY IN THE SAND

Ubisoft easily could have tossed off a DS action game with the Prince's name affixed to it, but they did a much better thing by combining card- and turn-based strategy in a fairly deep title that hooks you in. By the way, don't be turned off by the word "card." When you slap down the Superior Bows card and your archers lay waste to targets, you'll be happy you got this game.

One of the big reasons I like this title is because each of its parts – deck building, troop placement, playing cards, and battlefield strategy – has its own layers of complexity. Because you can typically only use a unit once per turn (by playing a card), you have to carefully anticipate the moves of all your troops – as well as the enemies – before you play the wrong card. And when a plan does come together and you've saved the right cards and put your troops into position, victory feels very sweet. Spatially, the game does well by taking into account proximity effects, facing and terrain variables, and general tactics. The computer AI does a good job keeping up, surprising you with some cards and even mixing things up from battle to battle. However, strategy experts may want to avail themselves of the multiplayer for a better challenge to their wits.



As much time as you spend building your deck and coordinating it with your troops' movements, there is no investment in your units. Not only do you not accrue experience, but because you switch sides throughout the campaign, the game feels too discrete despite the overall storyline. Regardless, this game's intricacies are well worth the reward.—**KATO**

BOTTOM LINE 8.5

> **Concept:** Mix turn- and card-based strategy genres in a well-done hybrid
> **Graphics:** Nothing to fawn over. Sometimes you'll confuse unit types with each other
> **Sound:** Typical Prince of Persia music that floats in the background
> **Playability:** The dual screens and touch screen put a lot of useful info at your fingertips
> **Entertainment:** The more you play, the more you're going to dig the game and understand its complexities
> **Replay Value:** Moderately High

Second Opinion 8

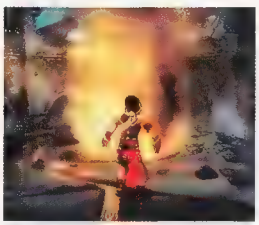
The core mechanics of facing, zones of control, and card-based tactics in this game are extremely solid. Even if the scenarios are woefully easy to win, crushing your enemies is still gratifying. I am rather disappointed that the developer didn't even try to make this title look decent – I've seen placeholder graphics that are more attractive, and most everything about the presentation is a failure. That's all peripheral to a strategy game, though, so I wouldn't hesitate to recommend this to someone who is already sick of Advance Wars.—**ADAM**

HANDHELD QUICKIES

PSP

Prince of Persia Revelations

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT
> **DEVELOPER** UBISOFT MONTREAL/PIPEWORKS
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 6 > **ESRB** M



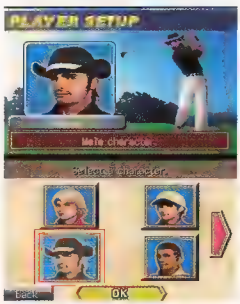
BOTTOM LINE 7.75

Handily working around some technical issues like camera control (the scheme is ingenious), the new Prince of Persia Revelations has a lot to offer fans of Warrior Within. The game offers expanded and sometimes redesigned areas along with a bit of combat system enhancement. But, there are some technology quirks, too. Voice syncing issues, occasional slowdown, some muddy textures that can make paths unclear, and volume levels (the voices are too quiet or the effects are too loud – take your pick) are each annoyances that won't stop a motivated player, but are unfortunate nonetheless.—**LISA**

NINTENDO DS

True Swing Golf

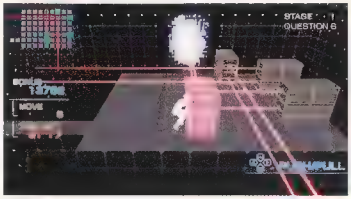
> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SPORTS (2 TO 4-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS) > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** T&E SOFT > **RELEASE** JANUARY 23 > **ESRB** E



BOTTOM LINE 7

Insipid elevator music and the complete absence of any personality aren't enough to kill this otherwise totally acceptable golf sim. Sporting a control scheme most similar to Tiger Woods DS, you drag the stylus along the touch screen, and your speed and trajectory as you hit the ball decides the quality of your swing. Numerous (but lackluster) courses and a local wireless multiplayer option give the game some legs, but there's not much beyond the enjoyable swing mechanic that really impresses.—**MILLER**





PSP

PQ: Practical Intelligence Quotient

> STYLE 1-PLAYER PUZZLE **> PUBLISHER** D3 PUBLISHER OF AMERICA
> DEVELOPER NOWPRODUCTION **> RELEASE** JANUARY 24 **> ESRB** E

FUN WITH TESTING

BOTTOM LINE 7.75

It would seem a strange breed that derives pleasure from a gruelingly difficult multi-hour intelligence test. And who would be foolish enough to recommend such torture as entertainment to others? Guilty as charged, I'm afraid. PQ was originally designed in cooperation with Professor Masuo Koyasu of Kyoto University as a new way to measure how dumb you are. Or how smart you are, if you want to be all politically correct and such.

Either way, this is a remarkably engrossing sequence of puzzles, especially considering that most of the levels use the most basic of game clichés. In this case, the old song is given new meaning by some great combinations of those simple ideas. When I first began to zip through the early levels, I feared how short the game would be, but later levels greatly deepen the experience.

I was a little frustrated that there seemed to be no way to lock your camera rotation during play, even though it might be a good measure of spatial reasoning. Finally, I was disappointed that the endgame offered so little analysis of my thinking style – I wanted so much more after I struggled through to the end.

Limited replay is enough to hold back the overall value here, but those brief first hours are definitely some of the sweetest and most unique puzzling in recent years, and certainly a highlight on the PSP.—**MILLER**

> Concept: Is it a game or is it a dastardly test for the government to find future military geniuses? You decide

> Graphics: Simple geometric shapes and outlines, and little more

> Sound: Each of the ten stages has its own engaging musical track, while sound effects are little more than utilitarian

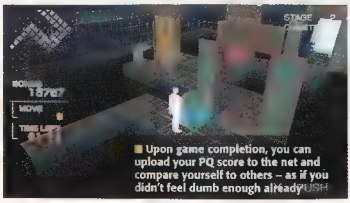
> Playability: The most basic of gameplay ideas become complex and engrossing, but better camera rotation would be appreciated

> Entertainment: Endlessly frustrating but fun your first time through, with the excitement rapidly failing upon replay

> Replay Value: Low

Second Opinion 7.25

The most addictive and famous puzzlers in gaming history like Tetris, Dr. Mario, and Lumines have a universal appeal that can keep you playing for months. Others, like PQ, don't make it beyond a few hours. There is a good variety of mind-benders (ranging from math to block-pushing), but eventually its frustrating test elements outweigh everything else. The first half of the game is fun, but the later tasks are simply drawn-out chores that don't seem to test anything but your patience.—**JOE**



Upon game completion, you can upload your PQ score to the net and compare yourself to others – as if you didn't feel dumb enough already.



NINTENDO DS

The Sims 2

> STYLE 1 PLAYER SIMULATION **> PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> DEVELOPER CRIPTONITE GAMES **> RELEASE** OCTOBER 24 **> ESRB** E10+

WELCOME TO THE HOTEL GONNA-BORE-YA

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

I've always enjoyed the way the Sims handheld games have focused on a storyline while maintaining some of the customizable fun of their console counterparts. The Sims 2 on DS continues this tradition in a basic sense, but integrates some clunky new design features along the way that make it hard to have a good time, no matter how much you try.

As a young go-getter put in charge of a podunk hotel, your created Sim needs to maintain the building while interacting with the town's citizens. Even though most of the ways you do this are familiar, the framework in which they take place is dramatically changed. Like Animal Crossing, The Sims 2 uses a real-world clock, which means that any one play session has about 20 minutes worth of stuff to do. At that point, you need to either turn the game off to wait for things to advance, or spend time gathering money by playing a poorly-conceived card game in the hotel casino (or cheat time by fiddling with the DS internal clock. Shh!).

Essentially, The Sims 2 on DS feels like the first few hours of a real Sims title that have been chopped up and spread out over several days in order to appear like a fully realized game. The content that's there can occasionally be fun, but there just wasn't enough of it to keep me engaged.—**JOE**

> Concept: The Super 8 of Sims games. It's not a total dive, but it sure ain't classy

> Graphics: It appears to be a pixilated, jaggy attempt at claymation

> Sound: Some hilarious character voices (incomprehensible as always) cancel out the generic background tunes

> Playability: The touch-screen menu navigation feels totally natural, as does the interaction with people and objects

> Entertainment: Just when it starts to get fun, you have to turn off the game and wait until tomorrow

> Replay Value: Moderately Low

Second Opinion 6.5

While this handheld edition of The Sims 2 is infinitely more playable than its PSP cousin, part of that is because it sticks much more closely to the roots of its precursors and is way less ambitious. Basing conversation game responses on animations, rather than highlighted face buttons, is nifty and innovative, but that's the biggest and best gameplay change here. The downers are that, despite some serious graphical upgrades, I feel like I've played this game before and mission objectives show up too slowly with the new bite-sized session plan.—**LISA**



NINTENDO DS

Tony Hawk's American Sk8Land

> STYLE 1 PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA WIRELESS OR NINTENDO WI-FI)
> PUBLISHER ACTIVISION **> DEVELOPER** VICARIOUS VISIONS
> RELEASE NOVEMBER 14 **> ESRB** E

TOUCH TONY

BOTTOM LINE 8.75

In real life, my shredding skills are limited to adding cheese to a burrito, so I've always been a fan of the Tony Hawk games. But the series hasn't seen many worthwhile entries on handheld systems. Then American Sk8Land ripped into town. Not only is this game the most fun I've had with the DS, it's even better than the last console title. Sk8Land is basically the same setup as THAW, and retains some of its flaws, like the feeling that you're constantly playing one big tutorial. But it overcomes this somewhat dull framework with a cool new visual style that recalls a cartoon, and some great DS-exclusive features. The map on the bottom screen is great for getting to know a level, and special moves can be activated by hitting touch points that are easily reached without lifting your hands from the controls. You can also record your own sound effects to be played at certain moments with the microphone.

As much as I enjoyed the new additions, the core of the game is its fast-paced skating gameplay, which has been ported perfectly to the DS. I was able to rip it up and score huge combos immediately after picking it up, and quickly shredded through the Story mode. Fortunately, Classic mode is included as well, as is multiplayer. To put it simply, Sk8Land is a no-brainer for Tony Hawk fans with a DS.—**JEREMY**

> Concept: THAW goes portable with a fresh coat of paint and some clever usage of the DS hardware

> Graphics: Bright, colorful cartoon-style visuals set Sk8Land apart from THAW and look excellent on the DS's sharp screen

> Sound: Ongo Bongo! Dead Kennedys! Black Flag! Awesome!

> Playability: Touchscreen controls have been integrated perfectly into the existing Tony Hawk controls, screen for flawless portable shredding

> Entertainment: Not only is Sk8Land one of the best DS games yet, I'd easily take this game over the latest console title

> Replay Value: High

Second Opinion 8.5

Gravity is for posers. In this DS installment, your board will soar higher than it will in other Tony Hawk games. This of course means one thing: bigger combos. Tack on an incredibly forgiving balance meter and you'll be constructing million point combos with the ease of picking your nose. As much as Story mode is a wasteland of simplistic tutorials, it does offer nicely crafted levels that target hardcore players. I don't like using the touch-screen to perform specials, but I do love how this game feels on the DS.—**REINER**

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Art Courtesy of Microsoft

HANDHELD QUICKIES

Ape Escape Academy

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION (2-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT AMERICA
> **DEVELOPER** SONY COMPUTER ENTERTAINMENT JAPAN > **RELEASE** JANUARY 17 > **ESRB** E

PSP



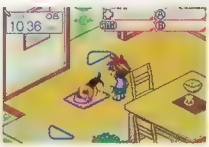
The Apes are still cute, and still pretty far off the mainstream radar. Which is a shame, because I think they are some of the best characters in all of gaming. After some failed attempts to revive interest in the series, Ape Escape Academy takes a page out of Nintendo's successful Wario Ware handbook. Basically a collection of minigames running the gamut from trivia quizzes to bullfighting, you compete in the contests to win squares on a tic-tac-toe board. It's as simple as that, and better for it, as Academy definitely offers some quick thrills. However, the loading times between games somewhat diminishes the fast-paced feel that Wario Ware delivers. Also, some of the more ambitious games, like soccer, are plagued by sluggish controls. Still, this unambiguous title manages to (mostly) hit its target.—**MATT**

Dogz

BOTTOM LINE 6.75

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** MTO/BACKBONE ENTERTAINMENT
> **RELEASE** NOVEMBER 17 > **ESRB** E

GAME BOY ADVANCE



Although, given the timing of this release, you might expect that Dogz is a cheap attempt to cash-in on the Nintendogs phenomenon, you'd be wrong. This is actually a new GBA version of a popular children's PC series. It's similar to that DS hit, except you have an onscreen avatar that explores isometric environments with your canine companion. There's a fair amount of depth, with various tricks, items, and things to do with your dog. However, it does seem awkward and static after having experienced the brilliant touch-screen play mechanics of Nintendogs. Bear in mind, this is aimed at very young children, so it might make a nice present. Now, I have to end this review before I start sounding like some snarky film critic bagging on the dialogue and plot development in *Dora the Explorer*.—**MATT**

The Sims 2

BOTTOM LINE 5.5

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER SIMULATION (2-PLAYER VIA WI-FI) > **PUBLISHER** ELECTRONIC ARTS
> **DEVELOPER** MAXIS/AMAZE ENTERTAINMENT > **RELEASE** DECEMBER 9 > **ESRB** T

PSP



There's great ambition in The Sims 2 for PSP, but little to be excited about. I can certainly get behind the graphics and level of interactivity within this world, but when practically every action starts a puttering disc load, the entire experience makes me yearn for nap time instead of some serious handheld Sims action. You can import a friend's Sim into your game or play a bit of online minigames, but neither is a great addition unless you've got a friend more masochistic than yourself to make the trades worthwhile. Also, the new Sanity meter is a nice idea, but executed so tightly that it's hard to keep on the right side of the game's mental balance. I've been a big fan of the series' portable outings in the past, but this is just a big dud.—**LISA**

WWE SmackDown Vs. Raw 2006

BOTTOM LINE 8

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER FIGHTING (2 TO 4-PLAYER VIA AD HOC) > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** YUKE'S
> **RELEASE** DECEMBER 13 > **ESRB** T

PSP



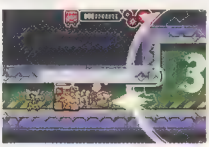
THQ's first PSP game does a great job of replicating the feel of watching the WWE on TV: experience one match, then sit through five minutes of boring crap. But rather than commercials for vocational schools and diet pills, it's loading screens here. Smackdown Vs. Raw 2006 for PSP closely emulates the excellent PS2 game, and the connectivity features are pretty slick. The fighting engine is fluid and an impressive amount of content has been fit onto the UMD, including some goofy little minigames and exclusive wrestler Jake "The Snake" Roberts. In fact, my only real gripe about the game is the insane load times, which is more a fault of the PSP than the actual game. But when I'm hankering for some portable wrestling fun, I want to actually play the game, rather than wait to play it.—**JEREMY**

Drill Dozer

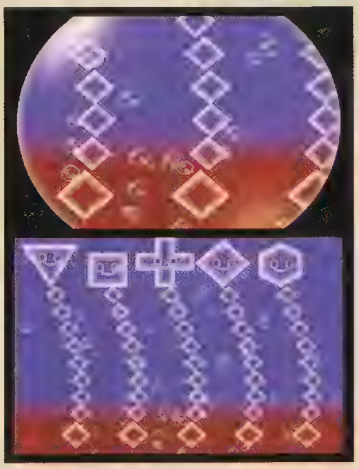
BOTTOM LINE 7.75

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER ACTION/PLATFORM > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO > **DEVELOPER** GAME FREAK
> **RELEASE** FEBRUARY 6 > **ESRB** E

GAME BOY ADVANCE



Drill Dozer reminds me more than anything else of my early days playing NES – brief moments of discovery punctuated by clever gameplay and a unique gimmick. Frankly, it doesn't really take much more than that to make for a fun play, which Drill Dozer most certainly is. As the spunky pink haired Jill, you operate a mechanized drill robot to bore through walls, furniture, statues, and pretty much anything else that gets in your way. Despite the relatively cutesy look of the game, there's a lot of variety to the action as you use your multipurpose drill to bounce, jump, hang, and demolish your foes. The hyper frantic soundtrack that sounds like it was written by drug-induced chipmunks I could do without, but the rest of the package is solid fun.—**MILLER**



NINTENDO DS

Electroplankton

> **STYLE** 1 PLAYER ACTION > **PUBLISHER** NINTENDO
> **DEVELOPER** NINTENDO > **RELEASE** JANUARY 9 > **ESRB** E

MUTATING MICROMUSICAL ORGANISMS!

As game reviews go, this is a toughie; Electroplankton really isn't a "game" in any conventional sense of the term. Also, it really doesn't fit into the mold of other music creation titles. At the risk of sounding like I flunked seventh grade composition class, I'll state my basic thesis here: Electroplankton is a thing that you play with. I can't really think of any other way to put it. There is no "point" to the experience, other than the oddly random, sometimes bewitching sounds that emanate from the various Electroplankton when you manipulate them onscreen – strange melodies that resemble what I imagine legendary electronic avant-garde krauts Tangerine Dream would sound like on a Cartoon Network and peppermint schnapps bender.

I found certain Electroplankton more conducive to something actually resembling music composition – particularly the Beatnes (which allow you to write five different repeating melodies at once) and Luminaria (controlled by onscreen arrows). The Rec-Rec mode is fairly entertaining as well, as you can record up to four real-time samples at once. Unfortunately, most of the forms are just too random and arbitrary to be really compelling for more than a few minutes at a time. Also, you can't actually save any of the sounds you create, making this little more than a temporary diversion. —**MATT**

BOTTOM LINE 7

> **Concept:** Manipulate small creatures to make strange music

> **Graphics:** The little dudes are kinda cute, and it's got a nice, blush... color palette. . Yes, I'm talking about color palettes

> **Sound:** I really like the sounds, and the scales are arranged so that basically everything you do sounds in key

> **Playability:** Poke 'em, prod 'em – it's as easy as that

> **Entertainment:** This would be a great Flash Internet site, as a standalone title, it's intriguing and unique, but not especially deep

> **Replay Value:** Moderate

Second Opinion 6.5

I feel a little bit strange about assigning a score to this strange piece of software. It's not really a game in any of the traditional senses of the word. But even if you categorize it in its own little world, it doesn't change the fact that the appeal and the charm dies within an hour of turning on your DS. The haphazard noisemakers have the same quality as those Fischer Price toys you buy for two-year-olds – making sounds and lights without any genuine organization or reason to what's happening. As an experiment in sound manipulation, there's certainly some value here. As an interactive entertainment package, Electroplankton fails to make a ripple.—**MILLER**

CHARTS

An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games

TOP 20

Listings Based Upon NPD Data For November 2005 Based On Units Sold

1 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (XBOX)



When we were kids, we reenacted all of the best Star Wars battles with action figures, like the one where Han got eaten by the T-Rex, or when all the storm troopers got totally owned by He-Man. What do you mean, you don't remember those? They took place right after nap time!

2 STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT II (PS2)



The Star Wars prequels created much debate in the fan community. Did *Episode III* redeem the series? Which sucked more, *Episode I* or *Episode II*? Why was Anakin such a baby? Well, there's one thing all Star Wars fans can agree on: The *Matrix* sequels sure suck.

3 CALL OF DUTY 2 (360)



Pleased to see you, Call of Duty 2. Congrats on being the best-selling Xbox 360 launch title. Activision must be very pleased by the way your sales stomped the Microsoft first party titles in the mud like they were...well, Game Informer editors in a flag football game. We're a feeble lot.

4 MADDEN NFL 06 (PS2)



So, we're starting to realize that this "Madden Football" character may not just be a fad. Something about Mr. Football's adventures in the intense, fast-paced world of male fashion modeling must really speak to people. That's what a guy at the bus station told us these games were about, anyway.

5 MARIO KART DS (DS)



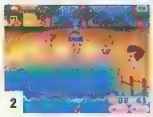
Speaking of popular, sophisticated gentlemen, here's Mario! His vigor, athleticism, and enthusiasm remind us of another popular celebrity: Doug Henning! They both have dandy moustaches and are from magical lands of fantasy: Miyamoto's brain and Canada.

Rank	Title	L. Mo	System	Score	Release	Price
1	Star Wars: Battlefront II	N/A	XBOX	8.5	11-05	$49
2	Star Wars: Battlefront II	N/A	PS2	8.5	11-05	$48
3	Call of Duty 2	N/A	360	9.75	11-05	$58
4	Madden NFL 06	3	PS2	9	08-05	$46
5	Mario Kart DS	N/A	DS	8.5	11-05	$33
6	WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2006	N/A	PS2	8.75	11-05	$49
7	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	4	PSP	9.25	10-05	$48
8	Madden NFL 06	N/A	360	7.75	11-05	$58
9	Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	11	PS2	8.25	10-05	$45
10	Mario Party 7	N/A	GC	5	11-05	$49
11	Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	N/A	PS2	7.25	11-05	$48
12	50 Cent: Bulletproof	N/A	PS2	6.25	11-05	$50
13	Blitz: The League	16	PS2	7.75	10-05	$40
14	Ratchet: Deadlocked	N/A	PS2	9	10-05	$39
15	NBA Live 06	2	PS2	7.5	09-05	$43
16	Soul Calibur III	12	PS2	9	10-05	$49
17	Dragon Ball Z: Budokai Tenkaichi	5	PS2	N/A	10-05	$49
18	Need for Speed: Most Wanted	N/A	PS2	8.5	11-05	$46
19	Need for Speed: Most Wanted	N/A	360	9	11-05	$59
20	Star Wars: Battlefront II	N/A	PSP	7	11-05	$49

Source: The NPD Group/NPD Funworld®/TRSTS® • David Riley 516-625-2277

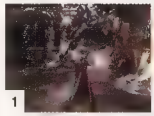
TOP 10 JAPAN

Rank	Title	System
1	Resident Evil 4	PS2
2	Animal Crossing: Wild World	DS
3	Monster Hunter Portable	PSP
4	Slime MoriMori: Dragon Quest 2	DS
5	Pokémon Fushigi Na Dungeon: Red	GBA
6	Dragon Ball Z: Bukeu Ressen	DS
7	Pokémon Fushigi Na Dungeon: Blue	GBA
8	Yawaraka Atamajuku	GBA
9	MegaMan EXE 6	GBA
10	DS Training for Adults: Work Your Brain	DS



TOP 10 GI

Rank	Title	L. Mo	System
1	Devil May Cry 3: Dante's Awakening Special Edition	N/A	PS2
2	Battlefield 2: Special Forces	N/A	PC
3	Call of Duty 2	3	360
4	Ape Escape 3	N/A	PS2
5	Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	1	Multi
6	Civilization IV	2	PC
7	Tony Hawk's American Sk8Land	N/A	DS
8	Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	6	PSP
9	Peter Jackson's King Kong	8	Multi
10	Battles of Prince of Persia	N/A	DS



The Staff's Favorite Picks

TOP 10 PC

Rank	Title	L. Mo	Price
1	Star Wars Battlefront II	4	$31
2	World of Warcraft	8	$31
3	Battlefield 2: Special Forces	N/A	$29
4	The Sims 2 Holiday Edition	N/A	$33
5	The Sims 2: Nightlife	6	$26
6	Age of Empires III	3	$49
7	Civilization IV	2	$49
8	Quake 4	N/A	$34
9	The Sims Complete Collection	N/A	$29
10	The Sims 2	7	$37



Based On Monthly Units Sold

REVIEWSARCHIVE

The Really Ugly Page Where You Can See Lots Of Old Review Scores

XBOX 360

Amped 3	8.5	Dec-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
Condemned: Criminal Origins	8.75	Dec-05
FIFA 06	8.25	Dec-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Kameo: Elements of Power	7.5	Jan-06
Madden NFL 06	7.75	Jan-06
NBA 2K6	8.5	Jan-06
NBA Live 06	6.75	Dec-05



Peter Jackson's King Kong – Xbox 360 – Jan-06

Need for Speed: Most Wanted	9	Jan-06
NHL 2K6	8.5	Jan-06
Perfect Dark Zero	7	Jan-06
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Project Gotham Racing 3	8.5	Jan-06
Quake 4	7.75	Jan-06
Ridge Racer 6	7.5	Jan-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.5	Jan-06
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05

PLAYSTATION 2

187 Ride or Die	6.5	Oct-05
Aeon Flux	7.25	Jan-06
Arc the Lad: End of Darkness	5.5	Jul-05
Armored Core: Nine Breaker	6	Sep-05
Atelier Iris: Eternal Mana	8.25	Jun-05
Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.5	Dec-05
Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance	5	Sep-05
Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder!	6.75	Oct-05
Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
Burnout Revenge	9.25	Oct-05
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	7.25	Jan-06



Ratchet Deadlocked – PS2 – Nov-05

Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Cold Winter	8.25	Jun-05
College Hoops 2K6	8	Jan-06
Colosseum: Road to Freedom	7.25	Jul-05
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Dance Dance Revolution Extreme 2	7.5	Nov-05
Darkwatch	8.5	Sep-05
Dead to Rights 2: Hell to Pay	5	Jun-05
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	6.75	Oct-05
Destroy All Humans	8	Jul-05
EyeToy: Kinetic	8	Nov-05
EyeToy: Operation Spy	6	Dec-05
EyeToy: Play 2	8.5	Sep-05
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05
Fatal Frame II: The Tormented	7.75	Dec-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
Flipnic: Ultimate Pinball	6	Jul-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Fullmetal Alchemist 2: Curse of the Crimson Elixir	6	Jul-05
Genji: Dawn of the Samurai	8.5	Oct-05
Graffiti Kingdom	6	Sep-05
Gretzky NHL '06	7	Nov-05
Guitar Hero	9	Dec-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Heroes of the Pacific	8.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Jak X: Combat Racing	7.75	Nov-05
Juiced	7.5	Jul-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Dec-05
Killer 7	7.5	Jul-05
LA. Rush	6.25	Dec-05
Legend of Kay	6.5	Oct-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05
Magna Carta: Tears of Blood	8.25	Dec-05
Makai Kingdom: Chronicles of the Sacred Tome	8	Aug-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Oct-05
Matrix: Path of Neo, The	7.25	Dec-05
Medal of Honor: European Assault	7.75	Jul-05
Metal Slug 4 & 5	8	Jun-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Mobile Suit Gundam: Gundam vs. Zeta Gundam	6	Aug-05
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	8.5	Oct-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	8.25	Oct-05
NBA 06	7.75	Jan-06
NBA 2K6	8.5	Nov-05
NCAA Football 06	8.5	Aug-05
NCAA March Madness 2006	7	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, The	5	Nov-05
Obscure	6	Aug-05
Outlaw Tennis	6.5	Sep-05
Pac-Man World 3	6.25	Jan-06
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Predator: Concrete Jungle	2.75	Jun-05
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	9	Jan-06
Psychonauts	8.5	Aug-05
Rachata Stones	9.25	Oct-05
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	7.5	Nov-05
Ratchet Deadlocked	9	Nov-05
Resident Evil 4	10	Nov-05
Romance of the Three Kingdoms X	7.5	Jul-05
Romancing SaGa	5	Nov-05
RPC Maker 3	6.5	Aug-05
Samurai Western	6	Jul-05
Shadow of the Colossus	8.75	Oct-05
Shadow the Hedgehog	4	Jan-06
Shin Megami Tensei: Digital Devil Saga 2	6.25	Nov-05
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
S.L.A.I.	5.5	Oct-05
Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves	7.25	Nov-05
Super Elite	7.5	Nov-05
SOCOM 3: U.S. Navy SEALs	7.75	Dec-05
Soul Calibur III	9	Dec-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	5.75	Jul-05
Stolen	6.5	Jun-05
Suffering: Ties That Bind, The	8.5	Oct-05
Takeden: Tactics	6.75	Dec-05
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	7	Oct-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Top Spin	8.75	Nov-05
Total Overdose	6.25	Jan-06
Trapt	6.75	Dec-05
True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Urban Reign	8	Oct-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
We Love Katamari	8.5	Oct-05
Wild Arms: Alter Code F	6	Jan-06
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
WWE Smackdown Vs. Raw 2006	8.75	Dec-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

GAMECUBE

Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battalion Wars	5.5	Oct-05
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	7.25	Jan-06
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Dance Dance Revolution Mario Mix	5.25	Jan-06
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas	5	Jun-05
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance	9	Nov-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Geist	6	Sep-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Harvest Moon: Another Wonderful Life	7.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Dec-05
Kuon	7.5	Jul-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05



Spartan: Total Warrior – GC – Oct-05

Mario Party 7	5	Dec-05
Mario Superstar Baseball	7	Sep-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Oct-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NBA Live 06	7.5	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
Pac-Man World 3	6.25	Jan-06
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness	5.75	Nov-05
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	9	Jan-06
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	7.5	Nov-05
Shadow the Hedgehog	4	Jan-06
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Super Mario Strikers	6.75	Dec-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Viewtiful Joe: Red Hot Rumble	7	Dec-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
WWE Day of Reckoning 2	7.25	Oct-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

XBOX

187: Ride or Die	6.5	Oct-05
Advent Rising	7.75	Jul-05
Aeon Flux	7.25	Jan-06
Batman Begins	7.25	Aug-05
Battlefield 2: Modern Combat	7.5	Dec-05
Beatdown: Fists of Vengeance	5	Sep-05
Big Mutha Truckers 2: Truck Me Harder!	6.75	Oct-05
Blitz: The League	7.75	Nov-05
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	6	Nov-05
Burnout Revenge	9.25	Oct-05
Capcom Classic Collection	8.5	Nov-05
Call of Cthulu: Dark Corners of the Earth	6	Jan-06
Call of Duty 2: Big Red One	7.25	Jan-06
Castlevania: Curse of Darkness	7.5	Nov-05
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory	4.5	Sep-05
Chicken Little	7	Nov-05
Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe, The	6.5	Dec-05
Cold War	6	Dec-05
College Hoops 2K6	8	Jan-06
Combat - Task Force 121	4	Jun-05
Conflict: Global Terror	6.75	Nov-05
Conker: Live and Reloaded	8	Aug-05
Darkwatch	8.5	Sep-05
Dead to Rights 2: Hell to Pay	5	Jun-05
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down	6.75	Oct-05
Destroy All Humans	8	Jan-06
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	8.5	Jun-05
Dragon Ball Z: Sagas	5	Jun-05
Dynasty Warriors 5	6	Oct-05
Evil Dead: Regeneration	6	Oct-05
Fable: The Lost Chapters	8.75	Jan-06
Fantastic Four	6.5	Sep-05



The Warriors – Xbox – Nov-05

Far Cry Instincts	8.75	Nov-05
FIFA Soccer 06	8	Oct-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
Forza Motorsport	8.5	Jun-05
From Russia With Love	7.75	Dec-05
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	9.75	Aug-05
Gun	8.75	Dec-05
Half-Life 2	7.25	Dec-05
Halo 2: Multiplayer Map Pack	9.25	Sep-05
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	6.5	Dec-05
Heroes of the Pacific	8.75	Oct-05
Incredible Hulk: Ultimate Destruction, The	8.25	Sep-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Iron Phoenix	4	Jun-05
Jade Empire	9.5	May-05
Juiced	7.5	Jul-05
Karaoke Revolution Party	8.5	Dec-05
Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes	7.5	Oct-05
King of Fighters: Maximum Impact Maniax	5.75	Aug-05
L.A. Rush	6.25	Dec-05
LEGO Star Wars	7.5	May-05
Madagascar	7	Aug-05
Madden NFL 06	9	Sep-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	7	Oct-05
Matrix: Path of Neo, The	7.25	Dec-05
Medal of Honor: European Assault	7.75	Jul-05
Metal Slug 4 & 5	8	Jun-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	9.5	May-05
Midway Arcade Treasures 3	8.25	Oct-05
Mortal Kombat: Shaolin Monks	8.5	Oct-05
Myst IV: Revelation	4.5	Jun-05
Namco Museum: 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection	8	Oct-05
NARC	4.5	May-05
NASCAR 06: Total Team Control	8.25	Oct-05
NBA 2K6	8.5	Nov-05
NBA Live 06	7.5	Nov-05
NCAA Football 06	8.5	Aug-05
NCAA March Madness 2006	7	Nov-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	Dec-05
NHL 06	7	Sep-05
NHL 2K6	8	Sep-05
Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge, The	5	Nov-05
Ninja Gaiden Black	9.5	Oct-05
Obscure	6	Jun-05
Outlaw Tennis	6.5	Sep-05
Pac-Man World 3	6.25	Jan-06
Panzer Dragoon Orta	8.5	Jun-05
Peter Jackson's King Kong	8.5	Jan-06
Predator: Concrete Jungle	2.75	Jun-05
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	9	Jan-06
Psychonauts	8.75	May-05
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	8.5	Nov-05
Raze's Hell	6	Jun-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shadow the Hedgehog	4	Jan-06
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sid Meier's Pirates	7.75	Aug-05
Sims 2, The	7.75	Nov-05
Sniper Elite	7.5	Oct-05
Spartan: Total Warrior	7.75	Oct-05
Spikeout: Battle Street	6.25	Jun-05
SSX On Tour	8	Nov-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	8.5	Dec-05
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	5.75	Jul-05
Stolen	6.5	Jun-05
Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel Without A Pulse"	8	Dec-05
Suffering, The: Ties That Bind, The	8.5	Oct-05
Taito Legends	8.5	Jan-06
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	7	Oct-05
Tecmo Classic Arcade	7	Oct-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	8.25	Nov-05
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 2: Summit Strike	8	Oct-05
Tony Hawk's American Wasteland	8.25	Dec-05
Total Overdose	6.25	Jan-06
True Crime: New York City	8.75	Jan-06
Ultimate Spider-Man	8	Nov-05
Wallace & Gromit: Curse of the Were-Rabbit	7	Nov-05
Warriors, The	8.25	Nov-05
Without Warning	6.5	Nov-05
WWE Wrestlemania 21	5.75	Jun-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Nov-05

PC

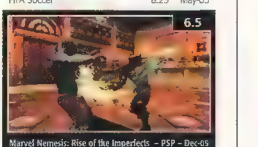
Age of Empires III	8.25	Dec-05
Battlefield 2	9.25	Aug-05
Black & White 2	8.5	Nov-05
Call of Duty 2	9.75	Dec-05
City of Villains	8.75	Jan-06
Codename: Panzers - Phase 2	8	Sep-05
Cold War	6	Dec-05
Combat - Task Force 121	4	Jun-05
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	9	Jun-05
Dungeon Lords	4	Jul-05
Dungeon Siege II	8	Oct-05
Dungeons & Dragons: Dragonshard	8	Nov-05
Empire Earth II	7.5	May-05
Fable: The Lost Chapters	9	Oct-05
F.E.A.R.	9	Nov-05
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	9.75	Aug-05
Guild Wars	8.75	Jul-05
Indigo Prophecy	8.25	Oct-05
Movies, The	8.75	Dec-05
Myst V: End of Ages	7.75	Oct-05
Panzer Elite Action: Fields of Glory	8.5	Jun-05
Quake IV	8.75	Nov-05
RollerCoaster Tycoon 3: Soaked!	7	Aug-05
Serious Sam II	7.75	Nov-05
Shattered Union	4	Jan-06
Sid Meier's Civilization IV	9.5	Jan-06
Sims 2: Nightlife, The	7	Oct-05
Stronghold 2	6.75	Oct-05
SWAT 4	8.25	May-05
Tak: The Great Juju Challenge	8.5	Jan-06
Trackmania Sunrise	7.25	Jul-05
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War - Winter Assault	8	Oct-05

NINTENDO DS

Advance Wars: Dual Strike	9.25	Sep-05
Animal Crossing: Wild World	8.75	Dec-05
Atari Retro Classics	8	May-05
Bomberman	6	Aug-05
Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow	9.25	Nov-05
Dig Dug: Digging Strike	6.75	Dec-05
Golden Eye: Rogue Agent	6.75	Aug-05
Kirby: Canvas Curse	8.5	Aug-05
Lost in Blue	7	Oct-05
Lunar: Dragon Song	4.75	Nov-05
Madden NFL 06	5	Nov-05
Mario & Luigi: Partners in Time	8.25	Dec-05
Mario Kart DS	8.5	Dec-05
Megaman Battle Network 5: Double Team	7.75	Nov-05
Meteos	8	Aug-05
Metroid Prime: Pinball	8	Aug-05
Nanostray	8	Sep-05
Nintendogs	8	Sep-05
Psi 'N Roll	6	Sep-05
Pac-Pix	7.75	Jun-05
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney	7.75	Oct-05
Pokémon Dash	5.5	May-05
Polarium	8.25	Jun-05
Rayman DS	6	May-05
Snowboard Kids DS	6	Jan-06
Sonic Rush	7	Jan-06
Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith	4	Jul-05
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 3: Mutant Nightmare	4	Nov-05
Trace Memory	7.5	Nov-05
Trauma Center: Under the Knife	8.25	Oct-05
Ultimate Joe Double Trouble!	7.5	Dec-05
Yoshi Touch & Go	7.5	May-05
Zoo Tycoon DS	6	Jan-06

PSP

Ape Escape: On the Loose	6.5	Jun-05
Archer Maclean's Mercury	6.75	May-05
Armored Core: Formula Front Special Edition	3.75	Nov-05
ATV Offroad Fury: Blazin' Trails	6.5	Jun-05
Coded Arms	6.75	Aug-05
Con, The	8	Nov-05
Darkstalkers Chronicle: The Chaos Tower	8	May-05
Death Jr.	7	Sep-05
Dynasty Warriors	6	May-05
FIFA Soccer	8.25	May-05



Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects – PSP – Dec-05

FIFA Soccer 06	7.5	Nov-05
FlatOut	6.5	Aug-05
Frantix	6.75	Oct-05
Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex	5.5	Dec-05
Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories	9.25	Dec-05
Gretzky NHL	6	May-05
Gripshift	8.25	Oct-05
Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee	9	Jul-05
Infected	8.25	Jan-06
Kingdom of Paradise	6.75	Jan-06
Legend of Heroes, The	6	Jan-06
Lord of the Rings: Tactics, The	6.75	Jan-06
Lumines	9	May-05
Madden NFL 06	8.5	Nov-05
Marvel Nemesis: Rise of the Imperfects	6.5	Nov-05
MediEvil: Resurrection	7.75	Oct-05
Metal Gear Acid	8.25	May-05
Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition	8	Aug-05
MLB	8	Jun-05
MVP Baseball	7	Jul-05
NBA	6.25	May-05
NBA 06	6.5	Dec-05
NBA Street Showdown	7	Jul-05
Need for Speed: Most Wanted 5-1-0	7.25	Jan-06
Need for Speed: Underground Rivals	8	May-05
NFL Street 2: Unleashed	7	May-05
PoPoLoCrois: A Story of Vanpool Tower	8.5	Oct-05
Rengoku: The Tower of Purgatory	5	Jun-05
Ridge Racer	7.5	May-05
Smart Bomb	6	Jun-05
SOCOM U.S. Navy SEALs: Fireteam Bravo	7	Jan-06
Spider-Man 2	7.25	May-05
SSX On Tour	7.75	Dec-05
Star Wars: Battlefront II	7	Jan-06
Tiger Woods PGA Tour	8	May-05
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	7.5	Dec-05
Toxobot	8.25	Jun-06
Tony Hawk's Underground 2 Remix	9.25	May-05
Twisted Metal: Head-On	8.75	May-05
Untold Legends: Brotherhood of the Blade	7.75	May-05
Virtua Tennis: World Tour	8.5	Nov-05
Wipeout: Pure	8.75	May-05
World Tour Soccer	6.25	May-05
X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse	9	Dec-05

GAME BOY ADVANCE

DK: King of Swing	7.75	Nov-05
Donkey Kong Country 3	8.5	Nov-05
Dr. Mario & Puzzle League	7.5	Jan-06
Dynasty Warriors: Advance	7	Sep-05
Final Fantasy IV: Advance	8.75	Jan-06
Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones	9	Jul-05
Monster Super Heroes	8.75	Dec-05
Mario Tennis: Power Tour	7.75	Dec-05
Mega Man Battle Network 5: Team Colonel/Team Protoman	7	Aug-05
Mega Man Zero 4	8	Nov-05
Pac-Man Pinball Advance	7	May-05
Pokémon Emerald	7.75	Jul-05
Rebelstar Tactical Command	9	Oct-05
Rivera: The Promised Land	8.25	Aug-05
Sigma Star Saga	8.5	Aug-05
WarioWare: Twisted	7.75	May-05
Yoshi's Topsy-Turvy	8	Aug-05
Zoo	7	Nov-05

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

Mastering Darkness and Light

By Game Designer Thomas Delbuguet



KLUMPA

The Prince is faster and more agile then Klumpa. So as a general rule, don't stay at the same place for too long and use the Prince's acrobatic abilities. Use these to your advantage and pay close attention to Klumpa's movements. Since he is slow, when he prepares an attack, simply get out of the way by running or rolling. It's also important to remember not to get too close to him. He is powerful enough to create shockwaves with each attack and knock the Prince to the floor even if not struck by his fist or sword. Klumpa always has an eye on the Prince, which means that if you get too close, he will snatch the Prince and toss him against the arena walls. Those spikes on the arena walls are not just there for decoration, either! So as long as Klumpa can see, the Prince will not be able to inflict damage. Look around the arena, there might be a way for the Prince to get to a higher level which could allow you to get a "stab" at his eyes! But remember, while making your way up to the higher levels, don't stay at the same place for too long! Once Klumpa has been robbed of his sight, it's possible to attack him directly. But be careful. He will attack randomly. Pace your attacks. Only strike a few hits at a time. Doing so will give you more chances to dodge his kicks by rolling or switching your attacks from one leg to the other.



HUNTER HOUNDS

The Hunter Hounds are always hungry for some Sands. As long as the Prince has some Sands, they will try to absorb it, even when trying to get away. When faced with the Hunter Hounds, simply bait them with some Sands. Make sure you have several Sand Tanks full before facing them. If you don't have any and you are already fighting them, try breaking surrounding objects to collect some more. Fight defensively and wait for the right moment to strike. Use your block while moving away from the hounds. Don't be afraid to roll or jump to dodge their attacks. The moment you near or see that one of the Hounds is absorbing your Sands, rush towards it. Strike the Hounds while its mouth is opened for a swift kill. If you don't have any more Sands and can't find any around you, simply use the walls to do dive attacks. This will knock the Hounds on to their backs. This is a perfect moment to quickly stab them in the chest.



TIME POWERS

The Prince's Time Powers can be very useful in both fights and in exploration. While exploring the environments, don't forget to use the Eye of the Storm Sand Power if you ever feel that time is short and you can't make it through a door in time. Slowing down time can help a great deal with tightly timed sequences. It could also be useful in a fight when outnumbered by several powerful enemies. Slowing down time will allow you to strike the enemy with more hits, or even give you a chance at collecting more Sands from the objects surrounding you. Remember to not break objects if you don't have any free Sand Tanks and you're fighting against Hunter Hounds. Also, take your time to collect the rewards from the Sand-Gates. You'll get rewarded with more Sand Tanks and unlock new Sand Powers such as the Sand Storm, which can be very useful in a fight by killing all of the enemies in one shot. Just make sure you have the time to charge the attack.

The Recall power is very useful. Don't be afraid to use it. If you're not too sure about where to go, or if you can make the jump, try anyways! Just rewind time afterwards. It can also be useful in a fight. If you get struck too many times in a row, try rewinding and using a different fight strategy.

HEALTH UPGRADES

Take your time to observe your surroundings. You might be able to find a secret path to a health upgrade! They aren't very hidden in the environment, so look for fairly obvious clues. They will usually be found when it seems like there are two possible paths to take. Look for doors on your path that seem like they could be opened. All you need to do is find the switch that opens it. Or go through curtains which are covering an opening. Sometimes, you may need to roll through a small space. There are six to find in total, which can be found in areas like the sewers, the arena entrance, or the elevator to name a few. Use the alternate views, they could help you see something you might have missed.

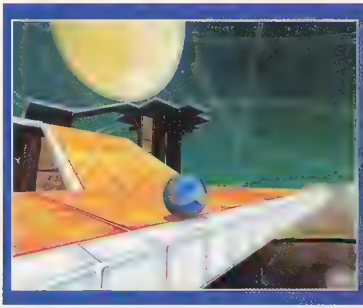


SAND CREDITS

Break the surrounding baskets, vases, chests, and other objects. Many will reward you with Sands, and some will also give you Sand Credits! With the Sand Credits, you'll be able to buy artwork from the three previous Prince of Persia games in the galleries. Keep an eye out for the golden chests. Each of them will give you 10 Sand Credits. If you just rush through the levels, you might miss a few. But if you take a little time to look briefly, you should have no problem finding them. Sand Gates can also be a great source of Sand Credits. Defeating bosses will give you a few extra credits as well. Though it can be a little risky at times, try breaking objects as the Dark Prince. He has a tendency to gather more Sands from these objects then the Prince. Just be careful, since you might exhaust your resources and run out of health.

CHARIOT RACES

Chariot races can be a little tricky at times. Since it's impossible to collect Sands as you race through the streets of Babylon, use your Sand Powers wisely. The Recall ability is very useful when making a fatal mistake. But don't forget to use the Eye of The Storm power to slow down time once it has been unlocked. It can be a great way to slow down the chariot's speed temporarily and get a better view of what lies ahead. Listen to the Dark Prince. He occasionally has interesting hints to say about which path to take at the very last minute. When controlling the Chariot, avoid getting too close to the walls and corners. It's not exactly like a car. Sometimes, taking a sharp corner can misalign you for the next corner and force you to do sharp turns one after the other. Something that is always fun is to turn your enemies into speed bumps and run them over instead of letting them jump onto the chariot. It won't actually slow the chariot down, but it's fun to do.



Live Arcade Spotlight

Marble Blast Ultra

Among the growing list of accessible and addictive games available on XBLA for the 360, one clear favorite has been Garage Game's new action puzzler, Marble Blast Ultra. It's not inappropriate to label this as a next-gen approach to the classic Marble Madness formula, albeit with some pretty remarkable upgrades in both the gameplay and graphics departments. Gravity switches, super jumps, and time freezes are just a few of the power-ups that help you navigate the 60 increasingly challenging stages. Ball physics and general movement all work quite well once you get used to managing your camera at the same time, and the simple 3D backgrounds are mesmerizing to look at in the same way an M.C. Escher sketch is. There are even 10 multiplayer arenas in which you can compete with your friends online. If you still haven't tapped into any of the remarkable little gems on the service, this might be the one to get you started.

Attention All Cheaters!

Cheat codes, by their very nature, are in many cases buggier than Virginia in August. So, unless you don't mind re-doing those 70 hours you put into the latest game, do yourself a favor and back up your save before using any codes

On a lighter note, you can send your codes to secretaccess@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured here and win a very special prize!

MULTI-SYTEM



The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX, GAMECUBE

During gameplay, hold down L1 (L on Xbox or GameCube) and enter the code

Level Skip – Down, Left, Down, Left, Down, Right, Down, Right, Up



50 Cent: Bulletproof

> PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX

Enter the codes at the in-game cheat menu

Invulnerability – s'finestyo
Empty 'n Clips Counter Kill – workout
Mike Mode? – the hub is broken
My Buddy Video – sayhellotomylittlefriend
So Seductive Video – yayoshome

"GI Droid"
(location unknown – last seen writing dirty words in the wet cement of your driveway)

PLAYSTATION 2



Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

For the following, pause the game and enter the code. You won't get a confirmation, but when you unpause the effects should be obvious.

Battle Rattle – Left (x2), Right (x2), ○, □ (x2), ○, Up, Down
Chainsaw – Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right ○, □, ○, □
Secret Fish Sword – Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, ○, □, ○, □
Telephone – Right, Left, Right, Left, Down (x2), Up (x2), ○, □, ○ (x2), □ (x2)

XBOX

Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

For the following, pause the game and enter the code. You won't get a confirmation, but when you unpause the effects should be obvious

Battle Rattle – Left (x2), Right (x2), Y, X (x2), Y, Up, Down
Chainsaw – Up (x2), Down (x2), Left, Right, Left, Right Y, X, Y, X
Secret Fish Sword – Up, Down, Up, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, Y, X, Y, X
Telephone – Right, Left, Right, Left, Down (x2), Up, (x2), Y, X, Y (x2), X (x2)

Code of the Month

Amped 3



Snowboarding bunnies and barbecued action figures should be the only reason you need to try out the bizarre and amusing world of Amped 3. But just in case the zany cutscenes aren't enough to attract your attention, check out these codes for some artificial awesomeness. Go into the cheat menu to enter your code. Upon correct completion, you'll hear a confirmation sound, and you should be all set.

All Awesomeness – RB (x2), Down, Left, Up, RT, X, RB, X (x2)
All Build Licenses – Left, RT, LB, RT, X (x2), Y, Down, Up, X
All Build Objects – LT, RT, Up (x2), RB, Left, Right, X, Y, LB
All Challenges – Right, LB, LT, X, Left, RB, RT, Y, LT, X
All Configs – Down, X, Right, LB, Right, RB, X, RT, LT, Y
All Gear – Y, Down, Up, Left, Right, LB, Right, RT, RT, RB
All Levels – X, Y, Up, Left, LB (x2), RT, X, Y, LT
All Music – Up, Left, RT, RB, RT, Up, Down, Left, Y, LT
All Sleds – RT, X, LT, Down, Right, LB, LT, RT, Y, X
All Tricks – LB, RT, Y, Up, Down, X, LT, Left, RB, RT
Awesomeness Always On – Up, RT, X, Y, LB, X, Down, LB, RT, RB
Loud Speakers – Y, RT (x2), LB, Down (x2), Left (x2), Right, LB
Low Gravity Boarders – RT, Down (x2), Up, X, LB, Y, RT, Y, Down
No AI – X (x2), LB, Down, Right (x2), Up, Y (x2), LT
Super Spins – X (x4), Y (x3), X

Stacy Kenner
Dayton, OH

Mod World

THE INDEPENDENT GAMES FESTIVAL
http://www.igf.com

The games industry isn't just a bunch of mega-publishers churning out licensed product, no matter what some of the news would have you believe. The 7th Annual Independent Games Festival is in many ways a celebration of what makes gaming fun. This gathering honors the most creative and entertaining ideas that have come out of independent, often volunteer, developers, and there are some incredibly cool titles this year might remind you why our hobby is so great.



The IGF has announced this year's finalists and they're definitely worth checking out. Sure, these games might have rotted for years in development hell at a big publisher, but independents are free to bring whatever crazy ideas they have to the masses. By all means, head over to the IGF's website and follow the links to check various projects in learn more.



THE FINALISTS

Darwinia, a title that looks to have a lot of fun with being a virtual terrorism inside a machine, is like nothing you've ever seen before. Dofus, a turn-based strategy/RPG/MMO, takes the Disgaea genre and puts it online. Professor Fizzwizzle presents players with a series of goofy logic puzzles, à la The Incredible Machine. Weird Worlds: Return To Infinite Space is a 4X space empire simulation that should appeal to old-school Master of Orion nuts. And Wildlife Tycoon takes the "tycoon" style of play and applies it to Africa's ecosystem.

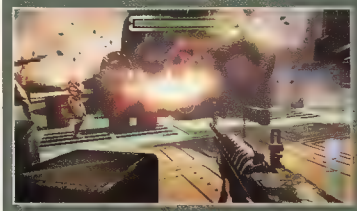


UNLIMITED ENABLED

Perfect Dark Zero

Hitting The Target

By Lead Multiplayer Designer Duncan Botwood, Producer Rich Cousins, and the game's testing team



SHORT CONTROLLED BURSTS WITH AUTOMATIC WEAPONS

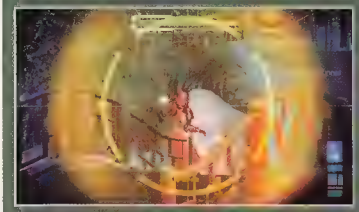
This is vital to keep the accuracy up; hard to do when you're being attacked yourself, but 'reticule discipline' is the main skill to master. PDZ is a game that rewards accurate fire.

CHANGE TACTICS DEPENDING ON THE OPPONENT

If you're going for an opponent's head but they keep rolling out of the way, adjust your aim down a little and catch them in the roll. Damage per hit against rolling players is increased a little to make up for the fact that they're evading your headshots.

BE UNPREDICTABLE

Try not to go the same way every time you play a particular background. If someone knows where you're going to be you'll be a free kill for them. Similarly, if you're being pursued by a relentless enemy, try to duck to one side or go right when you would go left. Turn a corner, double back, and attack them. Do pretty much anything you can to get the initiative back off them, and rather than being little more than a moving target you may end up with a kill.



GO FOR HEADSHOTS

Unarmored opponents will drop in one or two headshots, depending on the weapon; armored opponents will drop in three or four. Try turning the autoaim off and keep your reticule at head height.

ATTACK THE PILOT, NOT THE VEHICLE

Especially useful against Jetpacs, but trickier against Hovercraft pilots. The gunners are pretty ripe targets since they're exposed up there on the top of the vehicle.

INFECTION – THE LAST 30 SECONDS

You're still uninfected. You're on the radar. They know where you are. If you're in a room with any other uninfected players, get out. One of the more savvy players may try to kill you. The best thing you can do now is run. You shouldn't have a weapon up, since you run faster when you're unarmed. Ladders are death traps – avoid them.

You're infected. There are still uninfected players around. If they're moving, try to anticipate where they're going and cut their escape route off. Don't wait to line the shot up – if they're in front of you, fire. Every little bit of damage helps at this stage. Work together.

ONSLAUGHT – ATTACKER TACTICS

Use the Secondary function of the gun you start with. 99.9% of the time, this will be the Falcon. One Falcon firecracker dip thrown into a room is a nuisance; four thrown in is dangerous, eight is lethal. Where you can, run in en masse, but going in solo is practically useless. Try running in unarmed behind armed attackers, then when the enemy is near, grab their weapons. It's worth one player (or two players in the larger games) holding back and trying to snipe any defender unwise enough to show their face, but the majority of the attacking team should be getting in the base. Don't forget to use the Demo Kit to create an alternate route into the base.



TEAM SCENARIOS – MOVE AS A UNIT

Don't go anywhere alone. It's tempting to be the lone wolf, but you're much more effective if you're backing each other up. If one player is going to be sniping, then consider having someone go with them as a bodyguard on the small- to medium-size backgrounds. Use the chat channels to organize and pass information between small fire teams, and speak regularly so that if you get attacked or killed the surviving members will get a few seconds warning – a lifesaver in Dark Ops, especially if their attention is elsewhere.

DARK OPS

The best gadget you can buy is the Revive Kit. In spite of it being a one-use item, you get the biggest reward. A well-organized team that communicates can locate and revive their fallen comrades and reinforce the team, giving them the upper hand.

COUNTER TO WEAPON STEALING

If you have a weapon that is out of ammo, like the Falcon, it is worth keeping it when the enemy are stealing a lot. As the weapon thief approaches, switch to the empty gun. He will steal it and then you can shoot him with your other fully loaded gun, but it requires quick thinking.



INFECTION (UNINFECTED PLAYER HIDING)

Use the decoy fire on the magnum to lead the infected players to where the other uninfected players are hiding. The infected players will be led by the radar and the uninfected players (who are not on your team because infection isn't really a team game) will wonder how they were spotted.

TESTER TIPS

Keeping crouched during online play makes you less visible on radar.

Ammo Conservation – The DW-P5 and Fac-16 are both scoped weapons, but most people will naturally go for the more powerful Fac-16. However, the DW-P5 is actually the superior choice, as the baddies in most missions drop [illegible]

Communicate with your team using the area names to quickly group together after spawning.

Roll during a reload to make yourself less vulnerable during combat.

Be careful when zooming from a cover position (L trigger), as you'll leave your safe position behind the wall.



Buy armor in Dark Ops. The only thing more important than getting kills is not dying yourself, and this is a cheap way to gain an advantage.

Always aim at the feet of the players when using grenades on rifles.

When duel wielding, alternate weapons fire. This makes the weapons slightly more accurate, and you can still shoot whilst reloading the other.

Don't neglect your fists. Just one decent punch to the back of the head is enough to kill most opponents, and it won't take many more to kill somebody head-on. If you're facing a troublesome opponent, accept the loss, [illegible] the speed boost while being unarmed gives you the ability to dodge and outmaneuver your opponent, and wait for those sneaky blows to the back of a head for an easy point.

For more tips from the testers, check out this month's Unlimited.

Need For Speed: Most Wanted

Rule The Road

EA's Dev Team Shares Their Secrets



Drag races tend to have set traffic patterns. If you are able to memorize the traffic pattern, handling your shifts and maneuvering the course will become much easier.

Always keep an eye open for hidden shortcuts. Shortcuts can be a great way to shave some time off your race, but be warned as not all shortcuts will save you time.

Race lines are very important during the tollbooth races in the Challenge Series. Pick lines that allow you to maintain as much speed as possible, as time is very important in the later challenges. Also, in order to avoid traffic, pick race lines that allow for escape routes; there are a lot of tight corners in Rockport and you never know what may be coming up around them.



It might seem like common sense, but avoid hitting walls and objects. Everything you hit will slow you down. If you do end up running in to an object, try to use "Speedbreaker" just before contact. This will help maintain as much of your speed as possible and make it easier to recover from the collision.

If you are having difficulty avoiding the police, there are a few spots where you can get away from them for a bit and catch your breath before continuing your pursuit. The Bus Depot in the College area has a ramp inside of it that leads to an awning on the outside of the building. When you are at the very far end of the awning the Police will be unable to reach you. The Baseball field in the College area can also be used as a rest stop. Destroy the large sign in front of the stadium as you enter the field and drive inside. Once on the field the Police won't be able to bust you.

Learning how to manually shift can also be a good way to make up a few seconds in a race. Not only does manual shifting allow you to have more control over your acceleration, but if you downshift before corners you will no longer need to use your brakes. This will keep your revs up and your times low. But be careful, down-shifting through too many gears will cause you to lose too much speed and reduces your torque to exit the corners.

Sometimes good things come in small packages. A smaller, lighter car can be better than a big powerful one in many types of races. Any race that requires tight turns and quick acceleration is far more suited to a smaller car rather that a beefed up super car.

Avoid the golf course during pursuits at all costs. It might seem like a good area to lose the Police, but it isn't. It is wide open so it's hard to get out of their line of sight and the slick grass makes it impossible to perform tight maneuvers, something that is critical when engaged in a pursuit.



When starting a race there are two things you can do to help improve your acceleration.

Keep your revs at 6,000 just as the race begins. If you do, the tach's needle will turn blue, and when the race starts you'll get [illegible] of boost that you get when accelerating at the beginning of the race is far better than if you use it while going 150 MPH. It is also a good way to get in front of the pack early in the race so that you'll only have to play defense.

Use short bursts of "Speedbreaker" to drift around corners. When entering a hard turn activate "Speedbreaker." This will [illegible] it to drift. Once your car has reached the apex of the corner de-activate "Speedbreaker" and straighten your car out. Make sure you only keep the "Speedbreaker" activated for a couple of seconds or your vehicle will over-steer the corner.



If you are the hardest of the hardcore, you'll obviously want to get 100 percent game completion. When going through career, though this might be your intent, don't start off trying to complete every race. Some races will be tricky to do early on, coming back to race it at a later time with a faster car will make it a lot easier on you. You can go back to complete any challenge at any time, or you can go back and race your favorite races again and make some more cash for upgrades.

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DODGING THE SPOTLIGHT

THE TOP 10 UNSUNG HEROES OF CLASSIC GAMING



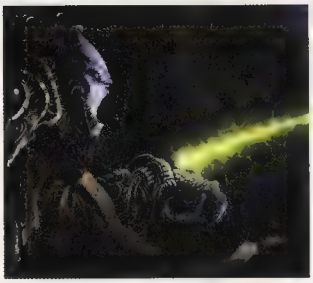
Behind every great hero is a great ally. We are thankful for our protagonists and the way they save the day, but look behind these vaunted characters and you may find someone even better. They may be stronger, smarter, or downright more awesome than the game's supposed star, generally lending invaluable support from the sidelines rather than stepping in the limelight. At the end of the day, they may not get all the credit for saving the world, but gamers know who's actually responsible for the main character's success. As our way of saying "thank you" for their assistance throughout the years, we present this tribute to the unsung heroes of classic gaming.

1 Gray Fox

Game: Metal Gear Solid (PSone)
Plays Second Fiddle To: Solid Snake

It takes a whole lot of brass to go toe-to-toe with Solid Snake, and it takes even more to taunt him with phrases like "That's it, Snake. Hurt me more" and "I've been waiting for this pain." As Snake's wartime buddy turned cybernetic ninja, Gray Fox was an even match for the legendary soldier even without a robo-suit and high-frequency katana – neither of which really belongs in the hands of a mentally unstable genetic guinea pig. He turns invisible, moves faster than the eye can perceive, and lives only to see a conclusion to his tortured existence. Gray Fox effortlessly dispatches foes that Snake needs an arsenal of military firepower to take down, crippling Metal Gear Rex before finally finding peace in death.





2 Zeratul

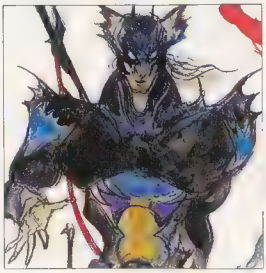
Game: Starcraft (PC)
Plays Second Fiddle To: Tassadar

Persecuted by the Conclave for generations and confined to the shadows, the Dark Templar channel energies forbidden to their other Protoss brethren. Foremost among these exiled warriors is Zeratul. He refuses to turn his back on the race that abandoned him, instead using his band of perpetually-cloaked psionic assassins to launch strategic strikes against the Zerg. Sure, Tassadar actually delivers the fatal blow to the Overmind, but Zeratul teaches him to draw on Dark Templars' power, not to mention that he slaughters enough Cerebrates to make the Zerg potentate vulnerable to Tassadar's suicide run in the first place. En Taro Zeratul!

3 Kain

Game: Final Fantasy II (SNES)
Plays Second Fiddle To: Cecil

Cecil thinks he has deep inner conflict, but he's basically just a Dark Knight who doesn't like doing bad things. That's nothing compared to Kain. He constantly lives in Cecil's shadow, is forced to betray his allies, and stoically stands aside as the woman of his dreams marries his best friend. Striving to become the embodiment of the Dragoons' strength and honor, Kain fights only to improve his skills and just happens to help save the world along the way. His amazing Jump ability is one of the game's most powerful attacks, but you never know how long you're going to have it at your disposal; Kain is unfortunately susceptible to mind control, and unwillingly stabs Cecil in the back a few times before joining up for good.



Sheik

Game: The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (N64)
Plays Second Fiddle To: Link

Normally his own wits and weapons are enough to get Link through the dungeons of the Legend of Zelda series, but even Hyrule's greatest hero needs a helping hand every now and then. Link's most impressive ally comes in the form of Sheik, a ninja-like warrior who occasionally shows up and makes Link's boomerang look like a baby toy. As if these awesome appearances weren't enough, Sheik becomes even more intriguing when it is revealed that "he" is actually Princess Zelda in disguise (sorry, the statute of limitations on spoiler warnings has officially expired). Link will probably be in therapy for a while dealing with those "my guy buddy is actually a super-hot princess" issues, but that moment alone cements Zelda's claim on the title of Coolest Girlfriend Ever.

4



Frog

Game: Chrono Trigger (SNES)
Second Fiddle to: Crono

It really says something about a knight's swordsmanship skills when he can be transformed into a bipedal frog and still be a nearly unbeatable opponent. Even though Frog doesn't see himself as the equal of his mentor Cyrus, he has perfected his technique through years of training and is a key component in several of the most useful double- and triple-techs in the game. Plus, even if you choose to join forces with the evil sorcerer who disfigured him, Frog still lends his blade to the cause, all in the interest of keeping the space-time continuum from being devoured by a huge space monster. Now that's nobility.

5





Zero

Game: Mega Man X (SNES)
Plays Second Fiddle To: Maverick Hunter X

Gamers can learn a very valuable lesson from Zero: Some robots become unstoppable wrecking machines after trudging through eight levels and boss fights, and other robots are just made that way. Zero definitely falls into the latter category, bypassing all the busywork and just kicking Maverick butt with every hydraulically-assisted step. Though he eventually catches a fatal case of Yoda Syndrome (dying before the climactic final confrontation), he makes time to show up and save X just often enough to give the poor blue bomber an inferiority complex that he's still trying to recover from.

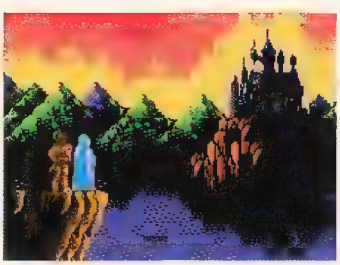
6

Sypha Belnades

Game: Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse
Plays Second Fiddle To: Trevor Belmont

With secondary character choices like a pirate and the son of the most powerful vampire in history, it's surprising that the woman with the sheet over her head ends up being Trevor Belmont's most powerful ally. She can't climb on walls or turn into a bat, but she does have a devastating lightning spell that annihilates enemies while Trevor stands there awkwardly clutching his limp whip. Also, magically freezing things and shattering them with a whack from a cane is the most fun you can have without buying your own tanker full of liquid nitrogen.

7



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Ada Wong

Game: Resident Evil 2 (PSone)

Plays Second Fiddle To: Leon Kennedy, Jill Valentine





Considering that the population of Raccoon City has transformed into flesh-eating monstrosities, it's nice to run into someone like Ada in your efforts to stay alive.

8 As a corporate spy and assassin, she is one of the only people who actually knows what's going on. She's forgotten more ways to kill than you'll ever know, and it's clear from the beginning that you need her more than she needs you. Why she chooses to help Jill and Leon is a mystery, and you're always left fearing the moment when your motives and hers cease to intersect. But so long as she fights alongside you, your odds of survival are greatly improved.

Freya

Game: Valkyrie Profile (PSone)

Plays Second Fiddle To: Lenneth Valkyrie

Even if you're a legendary Norse warrior goddess, there's still someone cooler than you. In Valkyne Profile, players learned this through the brief portions that allow you to fight alongside Lenneth's superior, Freya. Wielding powerful divine energy, Freya is unconcerned with the trifling affairs of humanity, instead focusing on her pivotal role in the upcoming celestial war. It's a little easier to take orders from a character when you know from first-hand experience that she could utterly obliterate you if she wanted to.

9



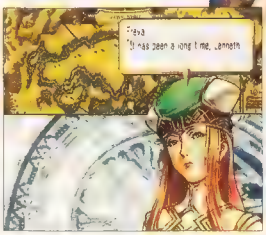
Metroid Hatchling

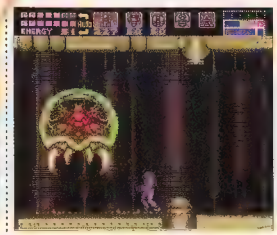
Game: Super Metroid (SNES)

Plays Second Fiddle To: Samus Aran

Samus can usually handle herself, but when she finds herself at the mercy of Mother Brain, an unlikely savior appears in the form of the recently rescued Metroid hatchling. Mutated by radiation, the once-tiny lifeform is a gargantuan and ravenous beast that drains the life from even the most fearsome creatures on Zebes, leaving only a pile of dust behind. Absorbing the Mother Brain's energy ray assault, the hatchling basically is the only thing that prevents Samus from becoming a stain on Tourian's cold, metallic walls. At the same time, it imbues her suit with the Hyper Beam, which is basically condensed doom in beam form.

10





The Top Five Lamest Tagalongs

"Hey, wait up guys!"

Some heroes have the benefit of companions that are out of their league, and others are saddled with the chore of dragging along worthless allies like sacks of lead potatoes. What follows are five of the most infamous lollygaggers, blabbermouths, and wieners that heroes have ever been forced to endure.

MILES "TAILS" PROWER

Game: Sonic the Hedgehog 2 (Genesis)

Extra Baggage For: Sonic the Hedgehog

The best thing about Sonic's coattail-riding burden? One day, his two tails will make two snazzy fox-skin hats.

PRINCE EDWARD

Game: Final Fantasy II (SNES)

Extra Baggage For: Cecil

His special battle command is Hide, which removes him from the battlefield completely and leaves a 12-year old girl to take his lumps. Classy, Edward.

CEDRIC

Game: King's Quest V (PC)

Extra Baggage For: King Graham

If there's one thing gamers love more than a cowardly know-it-all sidekick, it's rescuing said sidekick instead of saving their family from an evil wizard.

CAIT SITH

Game: Final Fantasy VII (PSone)

Extra Baggage For: Cloud

He's an annoying remote-controlled stuffed animal with a megaphone, so he's always too loud and technically feels no pain, so you can't hurt him no matter how much you try.

TOAD

Game: Super Mario Bros 2 (NES)

Extra Baggage For: Mario, Luigi, Princess Toadstool

Toad can't jump or float, but at least he sucks faster than anyone else in the game. Are those M.C. Hammer Pants or a diaper? Actually, we'd rather not know.

GREATEST GAME OF ALL TIME

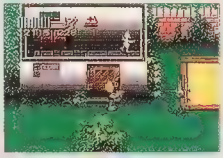
By William Pullman



ZOMBIES ATE MY NEIGHBORS

> **FORMAT** SUPER NINTENDO
> **PUBLISHER** KONAMI

The greatest game of all time is Zombies Ate My Neighbors for the Super Nintendo. Never has a game tested my skill and allowed me to enjoy it as much as this game did. The game has very good weapons and lots of secrets for you, the player, to discover. It has 56 levels of pure horror, but the game's graphics have a very colorful touch to it and it is not very scary. The game's levels have no save points to them, but they do have a password that you get after every four levels to put in the password menu if you want to come back to that point. There are a lot of enemy types and even more weapons.





The point is to save your neighbors before the zombies kill them. You can play multiplayer, and there are two characters to select from. One is a boy with a very big haircut, and the other is a purple-haired girl. They do the same things, but it gets very interesting when both of the people playing the game want to be the guy, or vise versa. There are some boss fights, and my personal favorite level is where you have to kill a giant baby. I know it sounds gruesome, but there is no bloodshed in the game and the baby isn't real, so shoot away. I would love to see a sequel to this game on any system, but right now there is none planned. So, if you have a SNES you should at least give this game a chance.

THIS MONTH IN GAMING HISTORY



Banking on innovation and ease of use (the controllers fit into the supplied console monitor), General Consumer Electronics' Vectrex system's death was announced in February of 1984. Originally offered for $200, retailers had been cutting the asking price in half and the console's manufacturer had been selling wacky accessories and product placement plans before its ultimate demise. Because of these last-ditch efforts, the Vectrex has supplied two of gaming history's highest-profile and most-coveted collectible items. One is the Mr. Boston game cartridge featuring the logo of an East Coast liquor chain – only two are known to exist. The other is the Vectrex 3D Imager, a first-of-its-kind set of goggles designed to supply a truly 3D game experience. Neither the accessories nor the console were terribly successful, and unsold units were later seen converted into personality and heart rate novelty machines for bars across the U.S.



N64

WCW/NWO REVENGE

> **STYLE** 1 TO 4-PLAYER FIGHTING > **PUBLISHER** THQ > **DEVELOPER** AKI > **RELEASE** 1999



Back in the late '90s, the WCW temporarily eclipsed the popularity of the WWE, with a host of grapplers that would later reach superstardom after going over to the other side. As temporary as the WCW's time at the top of the wrestling world was, their video games were never eclipsed by the WWE. Fans of wrestling video games hold the N64 WCW titles as one of the highest points of the genre, and WCW/NWO Revenge is still a heck of a fun game today. The blocky graphics look horrid by today's standards, but the solid wrestling mechanics are unmistakable. Each wrestler has a wide, accurate moveset, and the elegant mechanics are still being borrowed from today. The single-player mode is barebones compared to recent games, but multiplayer modes are as much fun as they ever were, especially the Battle Royale match. Graphics that were once pretty may grow hideous with age, but solid gameplay is something that lives forever.





PSONE

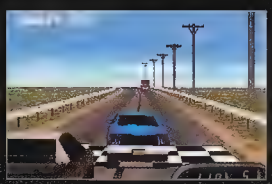
HOOTERS ROAD TRIP

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER RACING > **PUBLISHER** UBISOFT > **DEVELOPER** HOPLITE RESEARCH > **RELEASE** 2002



Filled with all of the class and fine-tuning you would expect from a licensed game based on a restaurant chain, Hooters Road Trip is a conceptual bowel movement. You won't know whether to laugh or cry as you navigate this twisted wreckage that tries to pass itself off as entertainment. It sort of qualifies as a racing game because it has cars and tracks, but it's nearly impossible to steer, avoid oncoming traffic, or win races. Even if you manage to succeed, you still lose; your reward is the embarrassment of watching clips of vapid Hooters bombshells trying to grasp the concept of "language" as they struggle to string together sentences with vague sexual overtones. Hot. Just like sitting down for a meal at Hooters, Road Trip has ample cleavage mixed with shame, but there are no buffalo wings here, and that makes all the difference.







PSONE | PC

GUBBLE

> **STYLE** 1-PLAYER PUZZLE > **PUBLISHER** ACTUAL ENTERTAINMENT > **DEVELOPER** MUD DUCK PRODUCTIONS > **RELEASE** 1997 (PC), 2002 (PSONE)



In the grand tradition of Pac-Man and Crystal Castles, Gubble burst onto the scene several years ago – and was promptly completely forgotten. Okay, so perhaps not so grand. The quirky little action/puzzle game had you navigating a cute purple alien who sounds like a Star Wars Jawa as he uses cordless electric screwdrivers and hammers to pull all of the nails out of an alien planet. Pretty weird. Even so, the simple gameplay is pleasing in the same way that those games it was clearly modelled after were. The PSone version is increasingly difficult to find almost anywhere, but the PC title is still floating around the net for anyone who is curious. A bunch of levels and some pretty hefty challenge in the later stages delivers a good deal of play time. Simple, wholesome fun – now go eat some apple pie.

*Score given to the game when it first appeared in Game Informer. WCW/NWO Revenge (GI #67 11/98)

VIDEO GAME TRIVIA

It's the February issue, and that means love is in the air. If you don't have a date for Valentine's Day, we're here to help. Because of our close friendship with all of your favorite video game characters, we can arrange a romantic outing with some of the biggest names in the business. Answer the following questions to see what you'll be doing on your ultimate digital dream date.

1 Ah, we miss the days before Bam Margera. Which of these skaters from the second Tony Hawk's Pro Skater did not appear in the first game?
- **A.** Bob Burnquist
- **B.** Rune Glifberg
- **C.** Steve Caballero
- **D.** Tony Hawk

2 In the Japanese version of Street Fighter II, the final boss wasn't called M. Bison. In fact, that name actually belonged to the character American gamers know as...
- **A.** Balrog
- **B.** Vega
- **C.** Sagat
- **D.** Akuma



3 Decomposing, shambling heroes are peachy keen! Which of these classic 1950s tunes wasn't re-recorded for the soundtrack of Stubbs the Zombie in "Rebel without a Pulse"?
- **A.** "Lollipop"
- **B.** "Earth Angel"
- **C.** "Mr. Sandman"
- **D.** "Rock Around the Clock"

4 Greetings, mongoloid spaceman! This doofus graced the boxart for which of these games on the NES?
- **A.** Bionic Commando
- **B.** Mega Man
- **C.** Codename: Viper
- **D.** Low G Man



5 Back in the day, Nintendo was slappin' 64 on games like there was no tomorrow, but many games escaped being "sixtyfourtified." Which one of these N64 games doesn't actually have the number tagged on the tail end?
- **A.** Castlevania 64
- **B.** Doom 64
- **C.** Pilotwings 64
- **D.** Wipeout 64

6 What 2D arcade brawler from SNK is this screen taken from?
- **A.** Street Smart
- **B.** Mean Streets
- **C.** Streets of Rage
- **D.** Brawl Town



7 True or False? Bushido Blade II allowed you to injure your opponents' legs, forcing them to fight from a prone position.
- **A.** True
- **B.** False



8 Did you buy Simpson's Wrestling? Of course you didn't. But if you had, you would know that one of the more obscure playable characters is...
- **A.** Comic Book Guy
- **B.** Hank Scorpio
- **C.** Bumblebee Man
- **D.** Drederick Tatum



9 This character from Microsoft's first-party disappointment Brute Force is a member of what alien race?
- **A.** Reptors
- **B.** Ferals
- **C.** Lizzords
- **D.** Melmacians



10 What is the name of the weapon in Ratchet and Clank: Up Your Arsenal that sucks enemies into a black hole?
- **A.** The Bouncer
- **B.** Flux Rifle
- **C.** Hole Reamer
- **D.** Rift Inducer



BREAKDOWN

100% of British children (ages 6 to 10) polled in a recent BBC survey admit to playing some form of interactive entertainment

25% The amount that total video game sales decreased in October 2005 when compared to October 2004

10% of the games on the Family Media Guide's "Top 10 Most Violent Games" overlap with Game Informer's "Top 10 Worst Games of 2005." Way to represent, NARC!

56% of the office is hooked on World of Warcraft. The other 44 percent is sick of hearing about it.

97% The decrease in Kristanna Loken's paycheck after appearing in *Bloodrayne*. Now she will appear at your birthday party or special event for the price of a hot meal.

★ Trivia Score & Rank ★



0-1
White Castle dumpster with Condemned bum



2-3
Go-Karts with Need for Speed's Ronnie McCrae



4-5
Meat market with Kasumi



6-7
Hat shopping with Kung Lao



8-9
Alleyway spaghetti with Red XIII



10
Waterslides with Kratos

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Video Game Trivia Answers: 1. C 2. A 3. D 4. B 5. A 6. A 7. B 8. C 9. B 10. D



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